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## Human Dignity - Functions and Meanings

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# Human Dignity - Functions and Meanings\*

Doron Shultziner

## Abstract

The concept of Human Dignity has become more and more prevalent in legal, moral and philosophical discourses. However, as much as linguistic functions of the concept have become widespread, its meanings have become ambiguous and blurred. This paper seeks to map and depict the main functions and meanings that the concept of human dignity encompass, and, hence, to enable both those concerned with law and its interpretation, and moral-philosophers to discern the different linguistic-spheres and the different meanings this concept encircle. The analysis will show that the meanings of human dignity are socially constructed in accordance with particular cultural and historical contexts. There is no one "true" meaning of human dignity, but rather different levels of "thickness" and "thinness" that are culturally determined in each society. The paper advances insights regarding the use of human dignity in both the legal parlance - as a justification for human rights in legal documents; and in the moral-philosophical parlance - as compared to a worldview on the one hand, and as related to humiliation on the other.

**KEYWORDS:** Human Dignity, Dignity, Human Rights, Justifications for Human Rights

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## Introduction

The concept of human dignity has several possible linguistic functions, which imply different and quite distinct meanings in various contexts. As Wittgenstein notes in his *Philosophical Investigations*, in order to understand the meaning of a word or a concept “one cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that” (passage 340 – original emphasis). By applying a Wittgensteinian methodology in this paper, I seek to identify and depict different language spheres in which the concept of human dignity has different meanings, which may, at times, be contradictory. The main reason for conflicts regarding the essence of human dignity derives from the fact that changing the context of a word may generate a misunderstanding of its meaning: “Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!” (Ibid, passage 11). Furthermore, following Nathan Rotenstreich (1983), I contend that human dignity is a rather eclectic and ambiguous notion that cannot be precisely defined. However, I do believe that a better understanding of the meanings that pertain to this term is possible by outlining and mapping the main linguistic functions of human dignity, an undertaking that will help clarify both the ambiguity concerning human dignity and the recurrent political use of the term.

Hence, this paper aims at outlining a model for the concept of human dignity in a philosophical-linguistic analysis. I intend to specify the main functions and normative meanings ascribed to the concept of human dignity (a) as a justification for various rights and duties in legal instruments (b) as containing a *thick* meaning which can be compared to a worldview that encapsulates the following (c) rights and duties (d) honor, and (e) a *thin* meaning defined by a degrading attitude or humiliation of human worth.<sup>1</sup> These functions will be analyzed below.

### A: Human Dignity as a Justification for Rights and Duties

The first main function of human dignity is primarily prevalent in legal instruments, both national and international. Put simply, this function is assigned to serve as a justification for the specific contents detailed in the legal document. The contents obviously vary between legal documents, but the *cause* for their enactment is attributed to human dignity. Let us look at some examples for this prevalent linguistic use in international and national legal instruments.

One of the first applications of human dignity in international documents is found in the preamble of the *Charter of the United Nations* (1945), where it is stated that:

We the people of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has

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<sup>1</sup> In using the Thick and Thin concepts in this paper I have relied on Michael Walzer’s useful distinction in his *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (1994). The strong linguistic and conceptual relations between human dignity and humiliation are found in Daniel Statman’s articles (2001, 2002).

brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small,

A similar reference is mentioned in the preamble of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948):

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people...

One can discern that *human dignity* and *human rights* are two separate and interdependent concepts, although this interdependence is not yet explained in its hierarchical and explicit formulation. Two further conventions of the United Nations clarify the affinity between these concepts in the following wording:

Considering that, in accordance with the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

**Recognizing that these rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person,<sup>2</sup>**

That is to say, in these U.N documents, human dignity is regarded as a supreme value that not only stands separated from human rights but also supercedes them. Human rights are derived from human dignity while the later encompasses the essential characteristics of human beings. Legal instruments do not specify what these traits are or what exactly human dignity consists of: these are taken to be, as Teresa Iglesias puts it, “bedrock truths”<sup>3</sup>

The linguistic function of human dignity as a justification for rights and duties is found in other international documents. For instance, the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man* (1948) declares that “the American peoples have acknowledged the dignity of the individual” and from this follows their recognition that “the essential

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<sup>2</sup> *United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, adopted by GA Res. 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966; *United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, adopted by GA Res. 2200A of 16 December 1966, *Preamble* (emphasis added). All the covenants mentioned in this paper are conveniently collected in Brownlie (1994).

<sup>3</sup> “To be a human being is not a status conferred upon me by anyone. Nor is this a status that I, nor anybody else, can confer upon others. [...] These are facts of recognition, of acknowledgment, constituting the very beings we are, and that we take for granted in what we do. We are not “instructed” in these truths, they become part of us in the process of being alive and aware as human beings. Let me acknowledge these facts as *bedrock truths*” (Iglesias, 2001: 114).

rights of man are not derived from the fact he is a national of a certain state, but are based upon attributes of his human personality”.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the *Final Act of the Helsinki Conference* acknowledges that “they [the states] will promote and encourage the effective exercise of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and other rights and freedoms all of which derive from the inherent dignity of the human person”.<sup>5</sup> To conclude this point, it is apparent that human dignity in international instruments is the foundation and justification for rights and duties: because of human dignity, human beings have rights and duties.<sup>6</sup>

After the examination of some international legal documents, we shall now examine some national constitutions. Actually, since the end of World War II and the inception of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the linguistic application of human dignity in national constitutions has increased significantly in comparison to the period before that war.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it was the scourges of the war that yielded the increase of the linguistic application of human dignity (Arieli, 2002). For instance, in the *Basic Law of Spain* it is said: “The Spanish State proclaims as a guiding principle of its acts, respect for the dignity, integrity and freedom of the human person”<sup>8</sup>. The *Constitution of India* seeks “to promote among them all [India’s citizens]; Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation”<sup>9</sup>. The *Constitution of Portugal* establishes that “Portugal is a sovereign Republic, based on the dignity of the human person and the will of the people”<sup>10</sup>. And the first words of the *Basic Law of Germany* determine that “Human dignity is inviolable. To respect and protect it is the duty of all state authority”.<sup>11</sup> In these examples and many more, human dignity is mentioned alongside with other supreme values such as “freedom”, “integrity of the nation”, “just society”, “solidarity”, “God”.<sup>12</sup> Namely, human dignity is taken as a supreme value that bestows moral justification upon the concrete instructions specified in the document. In other words, the articles in a constitution are meant to articulate and specify the belief in human dignity and what it requires.

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<sup>4</sup> *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, Final Act of the Ninth International Conference of American States*, 1948.

<sup>5</sup> *Final Act of the Helsinki Conference*, Adopted on August 1975, Article VII.

<sup>6</sup> Cf.: “human dignity is the source from which human rights and liberties are derived. [...] It is human dignity that provides the *causa*, as well as the *ratio*, for all human rights legislation (Cohn, 1981: 231-232 – original emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> There are about four constitutions (Mexico, Finland, Ireland and Cuba) that refer to human dignity in the period of 1900-1945 (before the end of the war); and more than 37 from 1945-1997, see (Iglesias, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> *Basic Law of Spain*, 1945, Article 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Constitution of India*, 1949, Preamble.

<sup>10</sup> *The Constitution of Portugal* 2 April 1976, Article 1.

<sup>11</sup> *The Basic Law of Germany*, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1949, Article 1. However, that does not necessarily mean there is judicial consent in Germany regarding what pertains to human dignity and what does not. For a review of such difficulties and legal usages with the concept in Germany consult Kommers (1997) and Ullrich (2003).

<sup>12</sup> “**In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred**, We, the people of Ireland, humbly acknowledging all **our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ**, Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial, Gratefully remembering their heroic and unremitting struggle to regain the rightful independence of our Nation, And seeking to promote the common good, with due observance of Prudence, Justice and Charity, **so that the dignity and freedom of the individual may be assured**, true social order attained, the unity of our country restored, and concord established with other nations, Do hereby adopt, enact, and give to ourselves this Constitution” *Constitution of Ireland*, 1937, Preamble (emphasis mine).

I know of only three unusual linguistic functions in national constitutions regarding the concept of human dignity. Their distinction lies in determining human dignity as a discrete *human right*. The first, in chronological order, is to be found in the *Constitution of Hungary*, where it is stated that “In the Republic of Hungary everyone has the inherent right to life and to human dignity. No one shall be arbitrarily denied of these rights”.<sup>13</sup> Second is the Israeli *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty*, where the right to human dignity is implied in article 4: “Everyone is entitled to protection of his life, body and dignity”.<sup>14</sup> The third unusual function is to be found in the new *Constitution of South Africa*, where human dignity is mentioned as the first supreme value upon which South Africa is founded.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, article 7(1) establishes a similar relation between human dignity and human rights to the one we have observed in the international instruments, i.e. where human rights are derived from human dignity and are affirmed by it: “This Bill of Rights is a cornerstone of democracy in South Africa. It enshrines the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom”. Nevertheless, article 10 declares that “everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected”. This assumption is strengthened in light of article 37(5), which confirms that human dignity is a right that cannot be restricted under any circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

However, these last three examples are the exception and do not constitute the rule. As has been said with regard to most constitutions, human dignity is regarded as the source or the supreme value upon which all rights and duties, and all state actions depend. Because human beings have dignity they *should* be given certain treatment and human dignity *must not* be degraded or humiliated.

### **A (1): Symbolic-Representation and the Lack of a Fixed Content**

However, one is bound to inquire about the legal essence of human dignity, and wonder about what exactly it means by required treatment (the *should*) and by humiliating actions (the *must not*). This leads to observing a twofold feature of human dignity as it is used as a justification for rights and duties in legal documents: symbolic-representation and a lack of a fixed content.

First, let us examine what is meant by symbolic-representation. In the preambles of documents that specify rights and duties, there seems to be some sort of an a-priori bedrock-truth justification, which is usually articulated as human dignity. This approach enables an accepted starting point for legislation, because as for itself, human dignity does

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<sup>13</sup> *The Constitution of Hungary*, 20 Aug 1949, Article 54(1).

<sup>14</sup> *Israeli Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty*. 25.3.1992 (revised at 10.3.1994).

<sup>15</sup> “The Republic of South Africa is one, sovereign, democratic state founded on the following values: a. Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms” *The Constitution of South Africa*, 1993, Article 1.

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that Supreme Justice of South Africa, Arthur Chaskalson, realizes that such a linguistic usage is rare and explains this in the following way: “The reluctance to give dignity the status of a discrete right in human rights instruments may be due to the breadth of its meanings and the difficulty of defining its limits... where this has been done, the entrenchment or implication of a residual right of dignity might be thought to have an open-ended quality which would be unmanageable” (Chaskalson, 2002: 135-136).

not determine what *the* reason or rationale among possible reasons and rationales for the existence and protection of certain norms in a legal document is, but, rather, leaves the philosophical debate undecided.<sup>17</sup> There is a major advantage to this approach, for the abstention from a *philosophical* decision regarding the source and cause for rights and duties paves the way for a *political* consent concerning the specific rights and duties that *ought* to be legislated and enforced *in practice* without waiving or compromising basic principles of belief.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the different parties that take part in a constitutive act can conceive human dignity as representing their particular set of values and worldview. In other words, human dignity is used as a linguistic-symbol that can represent different outlooks, thereby justifying a concrete political agreement on a seemingly shared ground.

This leads to the second aspect: *the lack of a fixed content*. The very fact that various worldviews and ideologies are strongly related to the concept of human dignity produces a paradoxical situation in that human dignity *as for itself* does not contain any concrete content or meaning. Because human dignity anchors different worldviews, it cannot represent any particular set of values or meaning that “naturally” stem out of it. There is no fixed and universal content that spouts out of human dignity and, hence, *its content and meanings are determined separately in each legal document in accordance with the political agreement achieved at that time*. This is mainly why recognition in human dignity yields different legal documents, as is evident when comparing the overarching duties in the *African Charter on Human and People’s Rights*<sup>19</sup> and the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man*<sup>20</sup> to the liberal rights emphasis in the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*<sup>21</sup> and to the limited scope of rights enumerated in the Israeli *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty*<sup>22</sup>, all of which recognize human dignity as a supreme value. Therefore, the content of human dignity is a corollary of a political agreement and compromise set in each legal document by the cultural, political, constitutional and other conditions, which can evolve and change in the course of history.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf.: “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, striving for a pronouncement that would appeal to diverse political systems governing diverse peoples, built on that faith and eschewed philosophical exploration [...] There is no agreed theory justifying ‘human dignity’ as the source of right, and we are not told how the needs of human dignity are determined” (Henkin, 1989: 134-135).

<sup>18</sup> This was, in fact, the approach taken by the drafters of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. See: “Maritain restated the question before the committee. Instead of, How can such disparate intellectual positions be reconciled?, he asked, How much agreement can we reach regarding practices even while remaining incurably divided regarding the underlying theory for such practices? [...] This distinction—taken over from the UNESCO experience by those working on the Universal Declaration—allows people to stand firm on all points of principle, avoiding the trap of moral indifferentism or relativism. A Muslim need not surrender one iota of Muslim faith, or a Christian of Christian faith. Nor need a Communist abandon Communist theory. Maritain’s approach was to ask one question only: Do you agree that the support of *this practice* and the prohibition of *that other practice* is a worthy criterion for the world community? Do you agree to declare that your nation will live under this code of practices?” (Novak, 1999 – original emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> *African Charter on Human and People’s Rights*, 17 June 1981, Chapter II (Duties), Articles 27-29.

<sup>20</sup> *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man*, 1948, Chapter II (Duties).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. footnote no. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. footnote no. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Cf.: “Developments in the idea and jurisprudence of rights during two hundred years under the Constitution suggest continuing refinement of our society’s sense of human dignity and an evolving appreciation of what human dignity requires” (Henkin, 1992: 227).

## B: The Thick Meaning of Human Dignity

So far, we have observed the linguistic usages of human dignity functioning as a justification for rights and duties in legal instruments. Yet, human dignity is not merely a legal concept that is expressed by specified norms. Rather, it is primarily a moral-philosophical term, which, like other moral concepts, has different levels of meanings pending on its context and linguistic functions. Michael Walzer, on whom I have relied in using the *thick* and *thin* terminology, states this argument clearly: “Moral terms have minimal and maximal meanings; we can standardly give thick and thin accounts of them, and the two accounts are appropriate to different contexts, serve different purposes” (1994, 2). Namely, the main difference between the linguistic functions that will be analyzed hereafter reflect discrete moral meanings intertwined with the concept of human dignity.

As a moral concept taken in the thick meaning, human dignity embraces two fundamental and interrelated premises: human and dignity. In fact, our understanding of *human dignity* is deeply inherent in our way of perceiving the world and its dwellers. The word *human* relates to basic assumptions in our consciousness, or rather sub-consciousness, about human nature, worth, place in the cosmos, attributes and character. And inseparably of *human*, we have a strong understanding of *dignity*: human dignified or natural existence, human normative behavior that best reflects their good nature, and human positive and negative attributes. Put differently, the thick meaning of human dignity encapsulates a whole moral worldview.

Our worldviews are “a complex, often unarticulated (and perhaps not fully articulable) set of deeply held and highly cherished beliefs about the nature and organization of the universe and one’s place in it” (Benjamin, 1990: 88). A worldview is formulated (and changes) in the course of our lives together with the process of forming our consciousnesses. Each worldview encapsulates the recognition about the “nature and organization of the universe” and “one’s place in it”.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the extensive meanings associated with human dignity overlap those inherent in a worldview, a moral worldview to say the least. Both are composed of general principles that are not lucid or fully verbalized. Namely, the thick meaning of human dignity is a maximal moral meaning that encapsulates both the convictions in human moral worth and the variety of desirable moral conducts that are commensurable with human essential worth, as also their reverse.

The thick meaning of human dignity is brought up in diverse contexts of moral parlance: when an attitude is taken regarding the issue of whether certain conduct towards children – like compulsory education or their lack of freedom in various issues – is commensurate with their human dignity or opposes it; when establishing a principle (or principles) of distributive justice that embody the dignity of a the human being and the

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<sup>24</sup> Compare Benjamin’s definition to Herbert Spiegelberg’s saying: “The search for grounds of human dignity presupposes a full pledged philosophical anthropology, showing not only man’s essential nature, its ingredients, its structure and its place in the cosmos, but also his values, rights and responsibilities. Only on such basis will it be adequate survey of the possible grounds for his dignity” (Spiegelberg, 1970: 61). See also (Rotenstreich, 1983: chapter III).

values of a just society<sup>25</sup>; when debating a policy that encroaches on citizens' privacy in favor of national security; when establishing a military moral code towards soldiers in the military apparatus, and determining a proper conduct of soldiers towards civilians in times of conflict – namely, codes of behavior that are becoming of human dignity<sup>26</sup>; when debating important issues such as the death penalty or abortions on the grounds of respecting or degrading human dignity. The linguistic function of human dignity in these linguistic spheres is embedded in a particular cultural or ideological understanding of what human dignity is and what it entails, which is a thick, stratified and all-embracing understanding, and which is not confined to only one area of human action or to one form of life. To put it in Wittgenstein's words: "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (passage 19). In our context, one can say that the different linguistic functions of human dignity reflect our diverse forms of life.

Moreover, albeit the thick meaning of human dignity is discernible in a particular culture, it is even more apparent in a cross-cultural perspective. It is a well-known fact that there are quite heterogeneous premises about human nature and human dignified conduct towards his fellow human beings. Therefore, human dignity has various thick meanings based on cultural and subcultural contexts (see also: Bryder, 1994). Our thick perception of human dignity is shaped in a particular social and cultural climate, which dictates the way we learn to recognize and evaluate other human beings.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, it goes (almost) without saying that our particular thick conception of human dignity is far from being objective or universal.

A citizen of a liberal-democracy, for instance, will find traditional Islamic conceptions of human dignity to be different and even incompatible with his own. "The Islamic tradition", says Abdul Aziz Said, "does not provide an explicit model for growth as understood in the West. Islam views materialism as detrimental to human dignity, undermining the nobility of the human species" (1979, 90). Furthermore, the notion of freedom in traditional Islam might also seem to be in conflict with a thick liberal conception of human dignity that is identified with rights and lack of restraints. In Islam, "human rights exist only in relation to human obligations. Individuals possess certain obligations toward God, fellow humans, and nature, all of which are defined by the Shariah" and "those who do accept these obligations have no rights, and any claims of freedom that they make upon society lack justification" (Ibid, 92). In addition, the dignified existence of *man* in traditional Islam and his appropriate posture in the social order is remarkably different from that of a (or "his") *woman*. In Islam, this difference between man and woman within the thick meaning of human dignity is due to the basic assumptions regarding their appropriate place in the cosmic and social order, which are considerably different from Western assumptions and practices.

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<sup>25</sup> For conceptions of distributive justice as reflecting a thick meaning of morality, see the second chapter in *Thick and Thin* (Walzer, 1994); and on the historical and conceptual connection between human dignity, economics and religion see (Novak, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> See "Human Dignity in the Israel Defence Forces" (Israel Democracy Institute, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Yuval Luria explains that "concepts of dignity, by which we perceive our life and others around us, are like psychological-glue through which social values that guide our life are attached to us and shape our conduct. They are the initial and fundamental dress that embody humane cultural values" (1994, 179).

In a similar manner, there are other thick traditional-cultural worldviews of human dignity that express human dignity in a way not parallel or committed to human rights. These thick meanings of human dignity emphasize the entitlements of society over those of the individual and the duties of the latter to his or her community which imparts one's human value (Donnelly, 1982). These cultural differences also project on the way in which political relations and regimes are organized. Societies whose historical and cultural heritage is founded upon the centrality of the individual have regimes and constitutive arrangements that emphasize and assure the rights of individuals counter to state power and society, while societies whose heritage is founded upon conformity, uniformity and adherence to a (more or less) defined set of values and norms have regimes and constitutive arrangements that emphasize the duties of the individual to his or her community (Howard & Donnelly, 1986).

To conclude this point, the thick meaning of human dignity is a particular cultural understanding of what it means to be human and have a dignified life with fellow human beings. In the thick meaning of human dignity, the emphasis is on the particular and subjective, not on the universal and objective. For this reason, Rhoda Howard's definition is very precise for the thick meaning: "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*" (1992, 83 – original emphasis). Howard's definition enables the inclusion of a variety of existing particular cultural *understandings* of human dignity and, hence, to recognize that there is more than one true meaning of human dignity, and by so to fit the cultural heterogeneous reality.<sup>28</sup>

So far, we have seen the similarity between the thick meaning of human dignity and that of a moral worldview, and further argued that various cultural understandings of human dignity exist. We shall now turn to examine three main components of the thick meaning of human dignity. These additional components are not alternative moral conceptions with lesser moral significance in comparison to the thick meaning of human dignity. Rather, they are contained and encircled within the thick meaning. The three other components of human dignity consist of a twofold function: first, they embody three distinct moral language spheres in which human dignity plays a central role and where its meanings are formed; and second, each of these meanings corresponds to a distinct moral echelon that is part and parcel of the thick meaning.

### **C: Rights and Duties**

The first component is rights and duties that are integral to a thick conception of human dignity. Actually, many people, especially in the West, use the term *human rights* as a synonym for human dignity<sup>29</sup>, and when they speak of human dignity, they refer to a certain list of rights. But human dignity is not expressed and assured in every worldview by human rights alone, and there are worldviews that dictate more duties than rights or rights only in subjection to duties. For while the Western world identifies human dignity especially with human rights, other cultural and ideological worldviews depict human

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<sup>28</sup> Consult also (Pollis & Schwab, 1979).

<sup>29</sup> For a similar claim see (Howard & Donnelly, 1986: 801).

dignity in regard to individual duties to his society, state, God, constitution, the duties of women to their husbands and the like (Donnelly, 1982).

Rights and duties are the main echelon in creating an affinity between a human's basic worth and his dignified existence, and they stem from the basic premises regarding human essential worth according to a particular cultural understanding. Rights and duties are enumerated in constitutional documents, which usually give voice to the central (or mainstream) values of society. For instance, the constitutions of Germany, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland and other liberal-democratic states voice a strong affinity between human dignity and human rights, since the former is taken to be the justification of the latter, as has been shown previously. But one can notice that human dignity is defined in a special way within societies and cultures that are not liberal in character.

For example, the preamble of the constitution of China establishes that the people, organizations and political parties of China “must take the Constitution as the basic norm of conduct, and they have the duty to uphold the dignity of the Constitution and ensure its implementation” and on top of that, it is said that “the state upholds the uniformity and dignity of the socialist legal system” [Article 5(1)].<sup>30</sup> A similar duty to uphold and dignify the constitution of the state, as part of society's goals, is to be found in the constitution of Iran, which is founded on the belief in Allah and Shiite Islam: “It is incumbent on all to adhere to the principles of this Constitution, for it regards as its highest aim the freedom and dignity of the human race and provides for the growth and development of the human being” [Mass-Communication Media (Article)].<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the Iranian Constitution emphasizes the special elements of woman's essential worth, and in accordance with this special worth, she is destined and honored to be responsible for the basic unit of society, namely, the family, while helping to foster and promote her man [Woman in the Constitution (Article)]. A different cultural emphasis can be found in the constitution of Thailand, which recognizes the dignity and rights of the individual, but first and foremost, recognizes the duty of every citizen to dignify the King, who is the first among citizens<sup>32</sup> and who must not be exposed to an accusation of any sort.<sup>33</sup>

To sum up this aspect, human dignity in the meaning of rights and duties is defined upon concepts that pertain to the rights and duties' parlance and sometimes as a synonym

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<sup>30</sup> And compare: “The personal dignity of citizens of the People's Republic of China is inviolable. Insult, libel, false charge, or frame-up directed against citizens by any means is prohibited” Article 38. *Constitution of China*, adopted 4 Dec 1982. [I have relied on the translation of the constitutions mentioned hereinafter found in: <http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/home.html>].

<sup>31</sup> See also: “The Islamic Republic is a system based on belief in: ... 6) the exalted dignity and value of man, and his freedom coupled with responsibility before God; in which equity, justice, political, economic, social, and cultural independence, and national solidarity are secured by recourse to: a) continuous leadership of the holy persons, possessing necessary qualifications, exercised on the basis of the Koran and the Sunnah, upon all of whom be peace...” Article 2 [Foundational Principles]. *Constitution of Iran* adopted 24 Oct 1979.

<sup>32</sup> “May the Thai people unite in observing, protecting and upholding the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand in order to maintain the democratic regime of government and the sovereign power derived from the Thai people, and to bring about happiness, prosperity, and dignity to His Majesty's subjects throughout the Kingdom according to the will of His Majesty in every respect” *Constitution of Thailand*, 1997, Preamble.

<sup>33</sup> “No person shall expose the King to any sort of accusation or action” Article 8, *Ibid*.

for rights and duties themselves. Yet, the precise balance between them is a consequence of cultural and ideological factors.

#### **D: Honor and Dignity**

Apart from rights and duties, other norms that are related to human dignified existence are derived from the basic premises about human moral worth and are grasped within a wide moral view. Among these norms, *honor* is included. In Hebrew, for instance, the word *Kavod* entails three meanings: dignity, honor and respect.<sup>34</sup> But English also has the connotation of dignity in the meaning of respect and honor, as when using the expression *to dignify* or *dignified* to describe certain acts and practices. This linguistic semblance stresses the strong connection between honor and dignity and it can be traced back as to the word *Dignitas* in ancient Rome, where and when it “connotes a certain position in the social context”, worthiness for an office of counsel (*dignitas consularis*), suitability or fame (Rotenstreich, 1983: 11-12). With the downfall of the old social hierarchies, a linguistic change occurred in the linguistic application of the concept of dignity and it was separated from its old hierarchical meanings in favor of more universalistic meanings (Taylor, 1992: 25-51).

Honor is a *social-appreciation* given to moral conducts, achievements and characteristics that are considered worthy by the relevant group, and this appreciation is expressed and *conditioned* by a certain *attitude* of society.<sup>35</sup> For example, a young man or woman that makes room for an old person in a public bus will probably gain recognition (whether explicit or implicit) from other passengers on that bus; otherwise, they might be condemned for refusing to do so themselves. A successful firm manager will gain appreciation (in different possible ways) for his traits and achievements that have brought him to this social status; an excellent sportswoman will earn appreciation on sports achievements in her field by granting her medals and trophies; an artist will be appreciated when her works of art are displayed in public; and a minister or parliament member will be admired for holding a high social and political rank.<sup>36</sup> In other words, honor is another echelon that dictates what is a dignified and undignified, a moral and immoral conduct within the thick meaning of human dignity. Honor is constructed upon the rights and duties

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<sup>34</sup> See also Orit Kamir’s (2002) recent linguistic and conceptual analysis.

<sup>35</sup> Honor requires social relations between humans, because without the attitude of the public towards the honorable man or woman, without this honor demonstrated in some way, honor does not exist – namely, honor is fully conditioned by appraisals of others to the honorable (Luria, 1994: 166); and compare: “The *Value*, or *Worth* of a man is, as of all other things, his *Price*; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his *Power*: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgement of another. An able conductor of Souldiers, is of great *Price* in time of War present, or imminent; but in Peace not so. A learned and uncorrupt Judge, is much *Worth* in time of Peace, but not so much in war. And as in other things, so in men, not the seller, but the buyer determines the *Price*. For let a man (as most men do,) rate themselves at the highest *Value* they can; yet their true *Value* is no more than it is esteemed by others” (Hobbes, 1996: 63 – original emphasis).

<sup>36</sup> Also Compare: “The publique worth of a man, which is the *Value* set on him by the Common-wealth, is that which men commonly call *DIGNITY*. And this *Value* of him by the Common-wealth is understood, by offices of Command, Judicature, publike Employment; or by Names and Titles, introduced for distinction of such *Value*” (Hobbes, 1996: 63-64).

echelon by the latter being more fundamental to human existence than the former. However, this distinction is not meant to separate sharply between the two interrelated echelons, since an affront to one's honor is usually expressed in the rights and duties' parlance. For example, insulting a person in public has been compared in Judaism to the spilling of one's blood. Rather, it marks two distinct areas of morals that are contained within the thick meaning of human dignity.

Honor is comprehended differently in a cross-cultural or chronological perspective, just as we have seen in the case of rights and duties. A person married to several women in a particular culture and takes care of their needs might gain great honor in a society that recognizes and values polygamy, but not necessarily (and sometimes necessarily not) in other societies and cultures. Alternatively, a society that once valued polygamy or approved of the slavery-institution might very well condemn them in some other point in time. Furthermore, a society that esteems the value of individual autonomy will honor certain actions that promote this value: material aid, education for one's rights and fighting for them. Yet in another aspect, religious and traditional societies might think that certain material aids (such as television), education for woman's rights and boisterously demanding religious freedom, are actions without honor and even as a real insult to human dignity according to their worldview.<sup>37</sup> In other words, honor is culturally relative since it is defined by the thick meaning of human dignity, which stems from different cultural contexts.

### The Wide Moral View

The two meanings of human dignity just described, rights and duties, and honor, are contained in a wide moral view that is destined to create harmony between the particular cultural understanding regarding human inherent moral worth and one's proper social relations with fellow humans.<sup>38</sup> This is an upward ambitious moral view (metaphorically and positively speaking), for its *end* (telos), to use an Aristotelian manner of speaking, is to create harmony between the essential characteristics entailed in fact that the human being is a social animal in nature, and the social-political order that would assist in epitomizing the good human virtue in an optimal way – just as physical and climatic conditions are required for the end of making a seed become a blossoming and fruitful tree.<sup>39</sup> Put differently, the

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<sup>37</sup> For the possible contradiction between claiming rights and human dignity see: “However, every time a person claims his rights this activity is not expressive of his dignity. Claiming one's rights might be unrelated to expressing dignity or even, in extreme cases, antithetical to the expression of human dignity. Someone might conceivably claim his rights in a very undignified way. He might be too pushy about his rights or he might claim some rights insincerely, not really believing that they were his but still hoping to get the benefit of the display” (Meyer, 1989: 524).

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Statman defines the wide moral outlook as “dignity as a moral attitude”. According to Statman, every immoral behavior is contained within dignity as a moral attitude (2001, 544).

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* distinguishes between the ultimate end (*telos*) which is happiness, and honor. Aristotle posits that some people confuse honor (which is what politicians strive for and is conditioned by those honoring the honored) with the quality of the person whose virtue is not conditioned by others, but is inherent in him. Compare: “People of quality, for their part, those who tend towards a life of action, go for honour; for pretty much this is the end of the political life. But it appears more superficial than what we are looking for, as it seems to be located in those doing the honouring rather than in the person receiving it, and

wide moral view stems from basic premises about human moral worth, and aims at promoting humans towards a state of harmony between these basic premises and the proper social-political relations that ought to exist. Yet, as the wide moral view is directed upwards, there is a third element within the thick meaning of human dignity that is included in a narrow moral view that is directed downwards, and this aspect will be discussed in the following analysis.

### **E: The Thin Meaning of Human Dignity**

The thin meaning of human dignity is a third discrete component of the thick meaning of human dignity. This component corresponds to a prevalent linguistic function with the concept of human dignity that connotes a meaning related to humiliation and diminution of human worth. The use of human dignity within the thin linguistic sphere indicates a behavior that is not in line with the premises about human worth. Such behavior is comprehended in terms of humiliation and as a conduct that is blatantly incommensurate with the basic assumption about human moral worth.<sup>40</sup> Whereas rights and duties, and honor, are contained within the upward wide moral view that is meant to harmonize human moral worth and one's proper social-political relation with other human beings, the thin meaning is contained within a thin moral view that is focused on the crude violation of that basic moral worth. In other words, with regard to behavior that is not honorable or that hinders rights and duties, the thin meaning of human dignity is revealed in behavior and situations that embody a breach and debasement of the very human moral foundations.

The thin meaning of human dignity is not susceptible to a precise definition by a list of concrete immoral conducts; yet, when such a humiliating or degrading conduct occurs, it is intuitively perceived by the humiliated person and those who share his feelings.<sup>41</sup> In this way, for example, Victor Frankl in his *Man's Search for Meaning* describes the humiliations that he has endured in the concentration camps during the Holocaust:

The pain he caused me was not from any insults or any blows. That guard did not think it worth his while to say anything, not even a swear word, to the ragged, emaciated figure standing before him, which probably reminded him only vaguely of a human form. Instead, he playfully picked up a stone and threw it at me. That, to me, seemed the way to attract the attention of a beast, to call a domestic animal back to its job, a creature with which you have so little in common that you do not even punish it (1984, 36).

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our hunch is that the good is something that belongs to a person and is difficult to take away from him... So it is clear, at any rate according to them, that excellence is of greater value. In fact, perhaps one might suppose that this is even more the end of the political life than honour is" (1095b21-1095b31).

<sup>40</sup> The thin meaning of human dignity with relation to humiliation is demonstrated both linguistically and conceptually in Statman's articles (2001, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> "Its [human dignity] intrinsic meaning has been left to intuitive understanding, conditioned in large measures by cultural factors. When it has been evoked in concrete situations, it has been generally assumed that a violation of human dignity can be recognized even if the abstract term cannot be defined. ***I know it when I see it even if I cannot tell you what it is***" (Schachter, 1983: 849 – emphasis mine).

The majority of prisoners suffered from a kind of inferiority complexes. We had all once been or had fancied ourselves to be “somebody.” Now we were treated like complete nonentities. (The consciousness of one’s inner value is anchored in higher, more spiritual things, and cannot be shaken by camp life. But how many free man, let alone prisoners, posses it?) Without consciously thinking about it, the average prisoner felt himself utterly degraded (Ibid, 72).

We grasp the humiliating and degrading situations that Frankl suffered intuitively and, hence, immediately understand the blatant lack of morality they are imbedded-in due to the sharp contradiction between the humiliating situation and the most fundamental human values on which we were educated and brought up. Not in every event that a person throws a stone on another person do we perceive this to be an offence to the latter’s most basic human existence; yet, when this action is accompanied by an attitude that is not even appropriate towards animals, we regard this as an offence to human dignity, as we refer to the thin meaning of the term.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly to the thick meaning of human dignity, the thin meaning is neither static nor universal. Certain behavior and conducts that were customary in the past are subjected to historical and cultural changes and, therefore, are weighted differently in different places and points in time. The slavery institution, to take a salient example, was widespread throughout the centuries, starting with the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, India, China, Greece, through the black slaves in Africa and the white slaves (Mamluks) in medieval Islam and ending with the slaves brought to North and South America. Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was there a substantial effective resistance to the established slavery institution and it was gradually perceived as immoral. This understanding culminated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be regarded as a severe breach of human dignity, and concrete national and international measures were taken for its abolition (Frowein, 2002: 122).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Frankl’s feelings that he has been treated like an animal lacking human dignity is a recurring theme in his book: “A man’s character became involved to the point that he was caught in a mental turmoil which threatened all the values he held and threw them into doubt. Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human life and human dignity, which had robbed man of his will and had made him an object to be exterminated (having planned, however, to make full use of him first – to the last ounce of his physical resources) – under this influence the personal ego finally suffered a loss of values. If the man in the concentration camp did not struggle against this in the last effort to save his self-respect, he lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value. He thought of himself then as only a part of an enormous mass of people; his existence descended to the level of animal life. The men were herded – sometimes to one place then to another; sometimes driven together, then apart – like a flock of sheep without thought or a will of their own” (Frankl, 1984: 60).

<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, slavery still exists in some parts of the world (like in parts of Africa). Compare: “Mindful that the peoples of the United Nations reaffirmed in the Charter their faith in the **dignity and worth of the human person**; Considering that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...states that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude and that slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms; ... Being aware, however, that slavery, the slave trade and institutions and practices similar to slavery have not yet been eliminated in all parts of the world; Having decided, therefore, that the Convention of 1926, which remains operative, should now be augmented by the conclusion of a supplementary convention designed to intensify national as well as international efforts towards the abolition of slavery, the slave trade and institutions and practices similar to slavery” *Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery*, adopted on 7 September 1956, Preamble (emphasis mine).

A further moral development can be seen in the case of suffrage. Despite the lack of an equal and general democratic voting right in most places in the world until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, this was not necessarily perceived as a humiliation or degrading conduct of the citizens lacking this right such as women, blacks in America and minorities; yet nowadays, in liberal-democratic states at least, the denial of equal suffrage on the basis of sex, race, religion or any other distinction not based on good enough reasons is considered a profound offence to human dignity.

The reason that the thin meaning of human dignity is subjected to change or, put differently, that humiliation is not static or universal, is due to the fact that the thin meaning is dictated and encapsulated by the thick meaning of human dignity.<sup>44</sup> Hence, changes in the thick meaning will probably entail changes in our understanding of the thin meaning as well, namely, our conception of what humiliation means. The social and historical developments emphasize how worldviews have gradually changed from a point in which a certain norm, to take slavery again, that was considered permitted and even perceived as a sign of honor by slave owners, has become a conduct without honor, until it was finally regarded as an immoral, degrading and humiliating conduct forbidden by national and international law.

As a result of the changes in the moral outlook of people in particular and societies in large concerning the acceptable and desirable moral behavior that stem from human dignity, social-political conflicts arise between societies or between different groups that comprise the same society. Such conflicts occur when changes in the moral consciousness of one group generate tensions with the moral consciousness of another group. This change can be formed, for instance, when social and historical processes cause one group to perceive (or to strengthen their perception of) the existing social order as a blatant injustice lacking moral justification, until the point they perceive this social order as inflicting severe humiliation on their most basic human worth.

A significant example for the last point can be seen in the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States under the leadership of Martin Luther King. The blacks in America were probably never satisfied with their political, social and economic status, yet only in the mid-twentieth century did a critical mass of black citizens start seeing this status as intolerable and as an insult to their equal worth and dignity as humans. Their rights prescribed by law were not respected and they suffered severe daily humiliations upon their dignity, as described in Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*.

[...] when you take a cross-county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are **humiliated** day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are

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<sup>44</sup> Cf.: "minimalist meanings are embedded in the maximal morality, expressed in the same idiom, sharing the same (historical/cultural/religious/political) orientation. Minimalism is liberated from its embeddedness and appears independent, in varying degrees of thinness, only in the course of a personal or social crisis or a political confrontation..." (Walzer, 1994: 3).

**never given the respected title "Mrs.";** when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating **sense of "nobodiness"**, then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait (King, 1963: 293 – emphasis added).

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men **will respect the dignity and worth of human personality** (Ibid, 295 – emphasis added).

King described the humiliating attitude towards the blacks as distorting their human personalities by instilling in them a sense of “nobodiness” similar to Frankl’s feeling that he and his prisoner friends were treated like “nonentities”. This attitude toward the blacks was not worse in comparison to their conditions in previous centuries in America, yet it was due to some improvement in their conditions and social status that the blacks could now see the salient contradiction between their wretched social conditions and the American values of freedom, equality and justice. In other words, the blacks now saw the racial separation in public transportation, restaurants, education (and much more) not only as a lack of due social respect or honor, but as concrete humiliation of their human dignity. Of course, not all Americans saw eye to eye with the blacks’ struggle for basic human recognition at that time; and, unfortunately, there were some who probably did not see anything wrong with that situation. But nowadays, it is perfectly clear that the sort of segregation and attitude under which blacks were until the sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were morally defective and stood in contrast to human dignity in the most fundamental way. Changes in the moral outlook in the United States (in general) have turned legitimate conducts of the past to evidently immoral conducts at present and the very thought of them upsets our moral conscience today.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike the case of the Civil Rights Movement in America, other moral conflicts are not that clear or easy to resolve. As aforesaid, the thick meaning of human dignity as a moral worldview dictates what the thin meaning is. Hence, in a comparative perspective, one can observe that a part of one society’s cultural heritage can seem to another as an offence and humiliation to human dignity. For example, a female might lose her life for violating the honor of the family in light of the high value ascribed to the honor of the family in some Bedouin and Moslem societies. Moreover, in large parts of Africa and in small communities in other parts of the world, a large number of little girls are circumcised (sometimes forcefully) by their families and it is estimated that more than 135 million girls and women around the world have had female genital mutilation.<sup>46</sup> These unfortunate

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<sup>45</sup> Compare also to Henkin at footnote no. 23.

<sup>46</sup> For the different traditional and other reasons for this practice and its scope see Amnesty International’s *Female Genital Mutilation: A Human Rights Information Pack* (AI Index: ACT 77/05/97) found on the Internet: <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgm1.htm#a7>.

examples stem first and foremost from traditional, religious and cultural worldviews that assume hierarchal relations between woman and man. Of course, we should stick with our moral convictions believing that these practices should be prohibited and vanished; yet, one should acknowledge that their existence is not due to pure evil or a deliberate offence to human dignity, but an outcome of a different cultural perspective.

Things get even more complicated once the conflict concerning human dignity is among groups that comprise the same society. Heterogeneous societies might find themselves in confrontation regarding different conceptions and interpretations of human dignity and the appropriate conducts that pertain to it. Put differently, what seems to one group as expressing human worth and dignity – like in the case of polygamy, abortion, euthanasia and more – might seem as an affront in the eyes of the other.

## **Conclusion**

Human dignity is a moral-philosophical term that has several levels of meanings, which correspond to different linguistic functions. The thick meaning of human dignity is a moral worldview that contains a particular cultural understanding of human moral worth and of his or her proper relations with society. The kernel of the thick meaning is composed of basic assumptions about human worth that one is brought up on and they become basic moral premises in one's consciousness. Out of this kernel sprouts a narrow moral view that embraces and defines the thin meaning of human dignity, which can be compared to roots planted deep in the soil. The parlance about conducts and attitudes that endanger these roots of humanity are bound with terms of humiliating and degrading human worth and dignity. Furthermore, from these very basic assumptions about human worth emerge a wide moral view that embraces and defines two more components of human dignity: rights and duties, and honor. Rights and duties stem from the moral kernel and unite into a solid trunk of a tree that is the main echelon in creating harmony between a human's basic worth and his or her proper relations with society. Honor is like normative branches that grow parallel to the making of the trunk and on top of it, while in the process of growing, some branches thicken and become an integral part of the trunk.

The three parts of the tree resemble the normative hierarchy between the three meanings of human dignity inside the thick meaning: the thick meaning is the whole tree. This becomes clear by mapping the damage onto each echelon. When one offends one of the tree branches, i.e. the honor, the tree is naturally hurt. Yet, this does not endanger the existence of the whole tree. When the trunk of the tree, the rights and duties, is hurt, this might result in a severe damage to the tree, since there is not much point in honor when more basic elements of human existence (that support honor) are jeopardized. However, when the roots of the tree – namely, the thin meaning of human dignity – are hurt or threatened, the whole existence of the tree as a tree and the human as a human is in danger.

This distinction is not a dichotomic one, for rights and duties are not absolute and they should frequently be balanced with one another and with other important values, and also because an offence to honor in certain circumstances can be equivalent to an offence in the thin meaning of human dignity, that is, as a humiliation to his basic human worth. In other words, identifying an offence to human dignity by the different levels just presented is context dependent and requires the consideration of cultural and subcultural aspects.

Hence, this model is not meant to sharply separate these interrelated components. But in any event, whereas many conflicts and offences are uttered in different language spheres as offences to human dignity, the analysis in this paper, I believe, helps to identify and clarify the relevant normative echelon that is referred to.

There is great beauty in the fact that human dignity has become so prevalent in modern moral discourse. Yet, as Nathan Rotenstreich argues, “precisely because the idea has become so current, the justification behind it and its particular meaning has become rather blurred, vague, or even ambiguous” (1983, 9). Rotenstreich posits that the notion of human dignity is “rather eclectic” and that it “assumes different types of justification and presentation which have evolved in the course of philosophical thinking. But above all it is an expression, perhaps the most prominent in the history of man’s self-reflection, of self-evaluation” (Ibid). It is the contention of this paper to provide a conceptual map for the eclectic idea of human dignity and to indicate that a variety of thick self-evaluation conceptions of human dignity exists. But, following Wittgenstein’s warning of assuming there is a “final analysis of our forms of language” and “a *single* completely resolved form of every expression” (passage 91 – original emphasis), I do not argue this to be a final model or map for this ambiguous notion, but rather a flexible one that helps one to discern the different linguistic functions of the concept and its interrelated meanings as they have become crystallized by this present time.

The recurrent linguistic use of human dignity in moral, political, philosophical and other discourses stresses our refined moral sense concerning human behavior. Especially in liberal-democracies, human dignity is inseparably understood as granting all citizens equal rights without any sort of discrimination. However, it seems apparent at this point in time that liberal democracies have transcended this understanding of human dignity. Charles Taylor has observed that “with the move from honor to dignity has come a politics of universalism, emphasizing the equal dignity of all citizens, and the contents of this politics has been the equalization of rights and entitlements” (1992, 37). This social-historical move has generated two tendencies in politics: the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference. “With the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else” (Ibid, 38). In fact, the politics of difference are themselves part of the politics of dignity, only instead of demanding equal rights and treatment, they demand recognition in their distinctness and unique identity. Thus, we paradoxically have a modern Roman version of *Dignitas* today, whereby dignity means treating one not merely as an equal but, rather, recognizing one’s values or group uniqueness.

It is interesting to note that nowadays it is simply not enough to give an identical treatment and the same parcel of rights to all people. Not recognizing someone’s particular identity or culture might be regarded as “a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (Ibid, 25). Remarkably, this type of misrecognition of others is voiced today similarly to the way Martin Luther King talked about his sense of “nobodiness” and Victor Frankl’s sense of “nonentity”. Of course, these situations differ considerably and cannot be compared; nevertheless, one can observe that nowadays, a lack of due recognition is also seen and uttered in the thin meaning of human dignity.

In most cases, these demands are probably not just empty words: they reflect authentic feelings of underprivileged groups; but it should be noted that not every lack of recognition is an insult or humiliation to human dignity in its thin meaning. Most of the conflicts inside liberal-democratic societies today are indeed between equal people who consider each other as such. Yet, it seems that too many conflicts in politics, which find their way into the justice halls, are actually about (social) *honor* – although what some contenders seem to argue for is an offence to their basic (thin) dignity. People and representatives of minority groups want not only to be symbolically recognized as equal in dignity and worth by the dead letter of written law; they want to be actually and vividly recognized as special humans with *a* particular worth by their fellow human beings, especially those who speak their language and share their history. I hope this paper helps to clarify the vagueness surrounding the concept of human dignity and the recurrent appeals to it, and by so to enable human dignity to remain a unifying concept rather than letting it become a controversial one.

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