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Kant on Human Dignity

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Manfred Baum, Bernd Dörflinger,
Heiner F. Klemme und Thomas M. Seebohm

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To
Kathryn and Lily

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Abbreviations

In referring to Kant's texts I use the following abbreviations:

<i>Anth</i>	<i>Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht. Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View</i>
<i>BDG</i>	<i>Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes. The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God</i>
<i>Collins</i>	<i>Moralphilosophie Collins. Lectures on Ethics Collins</i>
<i>GMS</i>	<i>Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten. Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>
<i>GSE</i>	<i>Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen. Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime</i>
<i>IaG</i>	<i>Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim</i>
<i>Log</i>	<i>Logik. Lectures on Logic</i>
<i>KpV</i>	<i>Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Critique of Practical Reason</i>
<i>KrV</i>	<i>Kritik der reinen Vernunft. Critique of Pure Reason</i>
<i>KU</i>	<i>Kritik der Urteilskraft. Critique of the Powers of Judgment</i>
<i>Mrong</i>	<i>Moral Mrongovius II. Lectures on Ethics Mrongovius II</i>
<i>NF</i>	<i>Kants Naturrecht Feyerabend. Lectures on Natural Law Feyerabend</i>
<i>NG</i>	<i>Versuch, den Begriff der negativen Größen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen. Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy</i>
<i>Päd</i>	<i>Pädagogik. Lectures on Pedagogy</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Physische Geographie. Lectures on Physical Geography</i>
<i>Refl</i>	<i>Reflexion. Reflection Note</i>
<i>RezUlrich</i>	<i>Kraus' Recension von Ulrich's Eleutheriologie. Kraus's Review of Ulrich's Eleutheriologie</i>
<i>RGV</i>	<i>Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft. Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason</i>
<i>RL</i>	<i>Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Rechtslehre. Doctrine of Right</i>
<i>SF</i>	<i>Der Streit der Fakultäten. The Conflict of the Faculties</i>
<i>TL</i>	<i>Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Tugendlehre. Doctrine of Virtue</i>

TP	<i>Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis. On the Common Saying: That May Be True in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice</i>
Vigil	<i>Die Metaphysik der Sitten Vigilantius. Lectures on Ethics Vigilantius</i>
WA	<i>Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?</i>
ZeF	<i>Zum ewigen Frieden. Toward Perpetual Peace</i>

All references are to *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (formerly: Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter (1902ff). Only references to *KrV* refer to the “A” and “B” pages of the first and second editions, all other references list volume, page number and sometimes the line number of the Prussian Academy edition of Kant’s works, e.g.: *GMS* 4:420.17. All translations are taken – unless otherwise stated – from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Introduction

Over the last 65 years the concept of human dignity has gained prominence in politics, philosophy, and ordinary thought. Human dignity is now the cornerstone of the constitution of many states and political manifestos, and United Nations documents present dignity as the justification for human rights. Rights “derive from the inherent dignity of the human person”, as the *International Covenants on Human Rights* (1966) put it.

In this context human dignity is often assumed to be an inherent value all human beings possess; as such, it is thought to be a value that grounds the requirement to respect other human beings. In accordance with this the German dictionary *Duden* defines dignity (*Würde*) as a “value inherent in human beings that commands respect.”¹ On this common view, it is because another person has dignity that one should respect him or her. For a philosophical account and justification of this idea, scholars often turn to Immanuel Kant.²

This book began as just such a project. What prompted my research initially was the desire to understand human dignity more clearly and to analyze Kant’s justification for it. But the more closely I studied Kant’s texts and the secondary literature, the less convinced I became that the contemporary view of human dignity was shared by Kant. Many puzzles emerge when one reads Kant under the assumptions of many contemporary scholars that he grounds the requirement to respect others on a value they possess. For instance, Kant says that all human beings should be respected, but that only a morally good will has absolute value; yet not all human beings have a morally good will. Or if value is supposed to be the foundation of moral requirements, why does Kant argue that no value can ground moral requirements? Similarly, why does he say that human beings have dignity because they should be respected (cf. *TL* 6:462, 435), not that they should be respected because they have dignity?

1 “*Achtung gebietender Wert, der dem Menschen innewohnt*” (*Duden* 1997, 821; my translation).

2 Cf., e.g., Gewirth 1982; Seifert 1997; Wood 2008; Dürig’s object formula in German law; and the discussion in Chapter 4.

Finally, why does Kant neither refer to value nor dignity where he says he justifies moral requirements, or where he summarizes his position?

Thinking through these puzzles, I was led to the conclusion that Kant asks us to radically shift perspectives, and turn our thinking around from what we ordinarily assume about the relationship between value and the requirement to respect others – a shift similar to his Copernican Revolution in metaphysics. It seems natural to assume that if one should respect others, it must be because there is something valuable about them. Kant agrees that this assumption is natural, but paradoxical as it may seem, he turns the relationship around. It is not because others have a value that one should respect them, but it is because one should respect them that they have an importance and a dignity. The justification for the requirement to respect others is that it is a direct command of reason. In this respect Kant's moral philosophy is parallel to his theoretical philosophy: Kant conceives of human beings not as passive observers, either in knowing the world, or in discovering what ought to be done. Rather, in both cases, reason approaches the world with its own *a priori* principles, and the principle of respect for others is one such principle. Very recently there has been a growing recognition in the Kant literature that Kant's moral philosophy cannot be based on a value, but that a shift in perspectives is needed.³ In accordance with this, I argue in this book that one can read Kant's positions on dignity and the requirement to respect others without a prior value as their foundation.

When one recognizes the character of this Copernican Revolution concerning dignity and respect, the striking result is that Kant's texts become coherent. If one does not look in Kant for a value that grounds moral requirements, then it is not surprising that neither value nor dignity plays any role in the texts where Kant says he justifies moral requirements, nor where he describes the essence of his moral philosophy. This way of reading Kant, then, can make sense of the passages in which Kant says that nothing can have a value other than that which the moral law determines for it; and one can likewise make sense of the passages in which, on the one hand, he says that only a morally good will can have an absolute value, but on the other, that even a morally vicious human being deserves respect. If all human beings deserve respect, but

3 Cf. Engstrom 2009; Reath 2012a; Herman 2010, Formosa 2012; Vogt (unpublished). For earlier skeptics see Onora O'Neill 1989, ch. 7; Hill 1992, ch. 2; Herman 1993, 239; Schneewind 1996; Dean 2000; and Johnson 2007.

if not all have a value (the absolute value of a morally good will), then value is not the ground of the requirement to respect others.

So I ask the reader to bear with me and try to enter into a different way of thinking about dignity. One can see my study as an attempt to see how far one can read Kant without invoking a foundational value, and it seems to me that one can do so all the way down. Kant's justification of the requirement to respect others is not what one would ordinarily expect – and he admits that – but following his train of thought can lead us to think more clearly about the possibilities for justifying that requirement. That is a task which the present work is intended to prepare rather than to complete.

Since what interests us most in the concept of human dignity is the question of whether there is a value all human beings possess, a value that grounds the requirement to respect others, I begin the book with that question. In Chapter 1 I examine Kant's conception of value to see whether he puts forth a value that grounds moral requirements. If value is supposed to be the foundation of moral requirements, what is this value? For instance, is it a metaphysical property human beings possess, something we do value, or something we should value? In Chapter 2 I discuss the most prominent attempts in the secondary literature to argue for a value that would ground respect for all human beings. Are these arguments really in Kant's texts? Are they valid? In Chapter 3 I lay out my interpretation of how Kant justifies the requirement to respect others. If, as I argue, Kant does not ground the requirement on a prior value, then how is it grounded? In the last two chapters I then look more closely at Kant's usage of 'dignity'. If Kant does not have a value that grounds moral requirements, how could he use 'dignity' as the name for such a value? In Chapter 4 I point out that, historically, there was a different way of understanding dignity, and that Kant's usage often reflects this older view. Finally, in Chapter 5 I take a close look at the famous passages in the *Groundwork* and *Doctrine of Virtue* where Kant does seem to define 'dignity' as an absolute inner value. Even if Kant often adheres to an older usage of 'dignity', does he not also use it to define 'absolute inner value'? The following overview of the argument of each chapter will provide a preview of my answers to these questions.

Overview of the Book

In Chapter 1 I interpret Kant's conception of value. If he did conceive of dignity as a value all human beings possess, a close look at his notion of value would seem to be essential for understanding his notion of dignity. Dignity is not supposed to be just any value, but a very special kind of value: a value that not only justifies the requirement to respect human beings, but also one that trumps other considerations, and one that a person cannot forfeit. But does Kant have such a conception of value? My conclusion is that he does not, and that his arguments rule out the possibility that any value could be the foundation of moral requirements. I had this conclusion in mind in comparing Kant's moral philosophy to a Copernican Revolution. But what is his argument?

Kant himself discusses the question of how value could ground moral requirements. His point is that if one tries to ground morality on any value (this would include a distinct metaphysical property a human being possesses inherently), heteronomy would result. For if one tries to ground morality on a value, one still has to explain how one could discern this value and why one could be motivated to follow it. For Kant external objects are given to human beings by sensibility. This relates to his arguments in the *Critique of Pure Reason* about how one can discern external entities. If the value is nothing one can sense through the five senses, then it must be a feeling, according to Kant. This means that the only indication one could have of a value external to one's own will is a feeling. Feelings, however, are fleeting, relative and contingent. As such they cannot ground a necessary and universal moral law, as Kant argues moral laws must be. One could object that Kant's argument does not rule out the possibility that there really is such a value in other human beings, but it raises the stakes. To dispute Kant's views one would have to develop an alternative epistemology to show how such a value could be discerned and ground moral requirements (e.g., a moral intuitionism). Within Kant's framework a grounding on an external value (i.e., a value outside one's own will and awareness) is not possible. Instead, he conceives of value as a prescription of reason. Value is something one is committed to valuing by the dictates of one's own reason. These dictates are not based upon a prior and independent value 'out there' in other human beings; rather Kant says that they follow from an a priori moral law – hence the Copernican Revolution in morality.

In Chapter 2 I discuss the most prominent arguments in the Kant literature that attempt to demonstrate a value of human beings that can

ground the requirement to respect others – such as dignity is supposed to be. If value is not an external property, could it be internal to the will and ground moral requirements, as has been argued in the literature? In this respect the arguments offered by Christine Korsgaard, Allen Wood, Paul Guyer, Richard Dean, and Samuel Kerstein do not necessarily contradict the interpretation of value I have offered in Chapter 1. This is because most of these scholars – with notable exceptions – do not conceive of value as a distinct metaphysical property, but rather as something one is committed to valuing, or something a perfectly rational being would value. To this extent I agree with the arguments that have been offered. However, I also agree with commentators who conclude that these arguments fail to derive a moral conclusion (that one should respect others) from non-moral premises (e.g., from the ends human beings set themselves in everyday life). The arguments mostly fail to establish that one really is committed to valuing other human beings.

In Chapter 3 I spell out the alternative reason why one should respect others, according to Kant. In Kant's view, morality is based on laws. Value is secondary to and determined by laws. These laws cannot be given by any external authority (including a value external to one's will), as this would yield heteronomy. If the law were given by an external authority, one would still need a reason why one should obey this authority. If this reason were said to be an inclination one has, then morality would be based on this inclination, thereby undermining the external authority. Accordingly, Kant conceives of the law to respect others as an internal law, given by one's own reason. Again the parallel to his first *Critique* is at play. There Kant argues that human beings are not passive observers of the world, but shape their perception of the world by a priori principles. Similarly in determining how one should act, one approaches the problem with a priori principles, according to Kant. One of these principles is the Formula of Humanity: "*So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*" (GMS 4:429) Kant says that this principle is at bottom the same as the Categorical Imperative, which he argues is a priori. I argue that the passage in which Kant first formulates the Formula of Humanity (GMS 4:427–9) confirms the view that Kant conceives of the Categorical Imperative and the Formula of Humanity as one requirement, expressed in different ways.

In Chapter 4 I explain how the previous analyses fit with Kant's conception of dignity. Kant cannot conceive of human dignity as a value that grounds the requirement to respect others: He does not have such a con-

ception of value, and he grounds the owed respect on a law of reason. In this chapter I point out that there is another conception of dignity, widespread in the history of philosophy, and that Kant frequently employs it. In this fundamentally Stoic conception, ‘dignity’ is not the name for a value property. Rather ‘dignity’ is used to express the idea that something is raised above something else. For instance, a Roman senator is raised above the rest of the citizens in virtue of his political power. Human beings are said to be raised above the rest of nature in virtue of possessing reason (or sometimes freedom). In this conception dignity is not in the first instance a moral or normative notion, but it expresses a relation, that one thing *X* is raised above another *Y*. What it is raised above and why depends on the context in which the concept is used. Kant frequently employs this conception when, for instance, he talks about the dignity of a teacher or the dignity of mathematics. But does he also use it in the famous passages in the *Groundwork* and *Doctrine of Virtue* where ‘dignity’ appears in conjunction with ‘value’?

In Chapter 5 I provide a close reading of the famous passages in which Kant is often thought to define ‘dignity’ as an ‘absolute inner value’. There is a way in which one can read these passages as a definition of dignity as value, without contradicting what I have said about value or worth in Chapter 1. If value is simply another expression for what is commanded by the moral law, and dignity is another expression for value, then dignity might likewise be what is commanded by the law. However, the passages in which ‘dignity’ appears in conjunction with ‘value’ are more complicated than that. In them Kant argues that morality is raised above all other forms of behavior. This is because only moral behavior is commanded unconditionally (by the moral law). Kant uses ‘dignity’ to express the idea that morality is raised above something else (in that only morality should be pursued unconditionally). Dignity is not a definition of value, but a way of saying that morality is elevated or special. In short, even here Kant uses a fundamentally Stoic conception of dignity.

* * *

My interpretation is novel in several ways. I explain more fully than has been done before exactly why Kant does not ground moral requirements on a value; I provide a new interpretation of the passages that lead up to the Formula of Humanity; including a novel reading of concepts like ‘end in itself’, ‘respect’, and ‘humanity’; and I show that Kant adheres

to a fundamentally Stoic conception of dignity. My interpretation makes Kant's texts coherent. It makes sense of the fact that Kant makes only a scarce and scattered use of 'dignity', and especially of the fact that he never relies on value or dignity whenever he says that he justifies moral requirements or whenever he summarizes his position. It also eliminates the apparent conflict between two very different justifications for morality that scholars detect in the *Groundwork*: the faculty of reason in the third section, and supposedly a value in the second section (where he explicitly says that he does not justify moral requirements, and where he refers to the third section for a justification). Thus a further strength of my interpretation is that it shows Kant's texts to be coherent.

In presenting these chapters to different audiences, I have received two main reactions. On the one hand, people grant that Kant is not a moral realist. He does not conceive of value as a distinct metaphysical property. On the other hand, people do not want to go back to the Categorical Imperative. Scholars have discussed extensively how one can derive concrete duties from the imperative, and the method has been found wanting. I believe that Kant did not intend the imperative to be a clear procedure for deriving specific duties, but in any case one does not have to reopen the debate. Rather my interpretation can satisfy both reactions. One can read Kant as anti-realist about value, since the requirement to respect others is *justified* with reference to the Categorical Imperative. However, since the Formula of Humanity is at bottom the same as the imperative, one can now use the formula to derive concrete duties.

The difference between my interpretation and the contemporary paradigm of dignity therefore does not lie in the application. Kant is adamant that one should respect all human beings. My interpretation merely offers a different *justification* for the requirement to respect others. My argument is also not a systematic claim. I am not trying to show that the contemporary paradigm of dignity is false or unfounded. My interpretation merely poses a dilemma for the contemporary conception: If one wants to justify the contemporary paradigm of dignity (as a value that grounds respect), one cannot just refer to Kant for a justification. One would have to look elsewhere. On the other hand, if one is interested to know how Kant viewed the matter, one finds support in his texts for a different conception of dignity. And there might be advantages to following Kant here. Kant reminds us that we do not directly perceive a value that would induce respect, but that the requirement to respect other human beings need not wait upon the discovery of any property so elusive.

Part I
Respect for Others

Three months before his death, Kant received a visit from his physician. Although he was nearly collapsing from weakness, Kant remained standing even after his doctor invited him to sit. Wasianski, a former student and now a trustee of Kant's, explained to the physician that Kant would only sit down after his visitor had been seated. When the physician reacted with disbelief, Kant took all his strength to say: "The sense of humanness has not yet left me." (Wasianski 1804, 263 f.)

It is central to Kant's moral philosophy that one should always respect all other human beings. He famously credits Rousseau for his appreciation of the importance of respecting all human beings:

I am an inquirer by inclination. I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge [...]. There was a time when I believed this constituted the honor of humanity, and I despised the people, who know nothing. Rousseau set me right about this. This binding prejudice disappeared. I learned to honor humanity, and I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe this attitude of mine can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of humanity.⁴

Kant holds that *all* human beings should be respected. Even a vicious man [*Lasterhafte*] deserves respect as a human being (cf. *TL* 6:463). Kant articulates this requirement in his Formula of Humanity as an end in itself, which he calls the supreme limiting condition of one's freedom: "*So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*" (*GMS* 4:429)

However, the exact reason why one should respect others remains a matter of debate. The prevailing view in the Kant literature is that one should respect other human beings because of an absolute inner worth or value⁵ all human beings possess. The absolute value is often called "dignity"⁶, and this value is said to be the reason why one should respect others.⁷ The value is often seen not just as the reason why one should re-

4 Remarks on *SE* 20:44; the translation is from Wood 1996, xvii.

5 In the following I shall use "worth" and "value" interchangeably as Kant only used one word: "*Werth*".

6 Cf., for instance, Paton 1947, 189; Lo 1987, 165; Löhner 1995, 34–44; For-schner 1998, 38; Wood 1999, 115; Schönecker/Wood 2003, 142. For a skeptical note on this prominent view see Meyer 1989, 520–534.

7 See Jones 1971, 130: "It is because of this kind of absolute value that one ought to treat persons as ends-in-themselves and never as mere means"; but also Wood 1998b, 189: "Kant's moral philosophy is grounded on the dignity of humanity as

spect others, but even as Kant's "most fundamental value"⁸, and as a value that is the foundation even of the Categorical Imperative.⁹ The debate focuses on the question whether human beings have this value or dignity in virtue of a pre-moral capacity they possess (such as freedom or the capacity to set ends)¹⁰, or because of a morally good will.¹¹

The prevailing view is intuitively plausible. If one asks whether one should respect others because they have a value, or if they have a value because they should be respected, the first option seems more natural. If one should respect others, it seems that it is something about them – a value they possess – that grounds this requirement.¹² However, Kant scholars seldom reflect upon the meta-ethical questions of what this value itself is supposed to be. What does one mean in saying that human beings have an absolute value? What is this value ontologically? How can one discern it, and why should one be motivated to pursue it? What exactly is the relationship between having a capacity (to set ends or be moral) and absolute value? If, for instance, one finds out during a Hobbesian war of all against all that the other has reason and freedom, does this not give more reason to be afraid of him (cf. *NF* 27:1320)? What exactly has Hobbes overlooked? And how does the claim that all human beings as such have value square with passages in which Kant says, for instance, that "nothing can have a worth other than that which the law determines for it" (*GMS* 4:435 f.), or that the absolute value of a human being can only be given to oneself in being morally good (cf. *KU* 5:443, cf. 208 f.; *GMS* 4:439, 449 f., 454; *KpV* 5:110 f., 147 f., 86)?

Kant himself reflects on the nature of value in connection with questions about the ground of the Categorical Imperative. Following his train of thought in the first chapter will bring out what Kant means by 'abso-

its sole fundamental value"; cf. Paton 1947, 171; Ross 1954, 52–4; Hutchings 1972, 287, 290; Lo 1987, 165; and Löhrer 1995, 124, 34–36.

8 Wood 1998b, 189; cf. his 2008, 94.

9 See Guyer 2000, 150–157. Here and throughout the rest of the book with "Categorical Imperative" I shall refer to the Universal Law Formula: "*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.*" (*GMS* 4:421)

10 Cf. Guyer 2000, ch. 4; Korsgaard 1996a, ch. 4; Wood 1999, ch. 4.

11 Cf. Paton 1947, 168 f.; Ross 1954, 51 f.; Ricken 1989, 246; Dean 2006, chs. 1–5; and Kerstein 2006, 219. For an alternative grounding of morality (other than on a value) cf. Engstrom 2009; Reath 2012a; and Herman 2010.

12 Cf. Watkins/FitzPatrick 2002, 364.

lute inner value', what his most fundamental value is, and whether there could be a value underlying the Categorical Imperative, in either the requirement to universalize one's maxim, or in the requirement to respect others. In order to pursue these questions I shall first look at the meta-ethical question of what the ontological nature of absolute inner value is for Kant (Chapter 1). I shall then relate this to the standard views that have been given in the Kant literature (Chapter 2). Finally, I shall look at the justification for the requirement to respect others, as expressed in Kant's Formula of Humanity (Chapter 3). I claim that Kant in fact reverses the relationship between value and the requirement to respect others. For him it is not that one should respect others because they have a value or an importance, but that they have an importance because they should be respected. The requirement to respect others is justified with reference to a direct command of reason. In this Kant's moral philosophy is parallel to his theoretical philosophy. It is a priori principles that shape theoretical and practical knowledge.¹³

13 Cf. Schneewind 1998, 484; Engstrom 2009; Rauscher 2002.