Mette Lebech

On the Problem of Human Dignity

A Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Investigation

Φ
Orbis Phaenomenologicus
Königshausen & Neumann

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Tschechische Republik

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Gedruckt mit freundlicher Unterstützung
der National University of Ireland, Maynooth
und dem Universitätsverbund der National University of Ireland.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier
Umschlag: skh-softics / coverart
Umschlagabbildung: atanasis © shutterstock.com

Printed in Germany
ISBN 978-3-8260-3815-0
www.koenigshausen-neumann.de
www.buchhandel.de
www.buchkatalog.de

Ils sont tous égaux, car leur valeur est infinie.

Jos Hendrickx

To
my mother († 8 September 2007),
James McEvoy,
and my students,

in gratitude.

Abbreviations:

Empathy:	Edith Stein: *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, Buchdrückerei des Waisenhauses, Halle, 1916 (forthcoming in *ESGA* 5), transl. *On the Problem of Empathy*, by W. Stein, *CWES*, Vol. 3, 1989.
Phil. of Ps. and the Hum.:	Edith Stein: *Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften,* Max Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1970 (forthcoming in *ESGA* 6), transl. *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities* by Mary Catherine Baseheart and Marianne Sawicki, *CWES*, vol. 7, 2000.
Study-guide:	Mette Lebech: 'Study-guide to Edith Stein's Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities', *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society*, 2004, pp. 40-76.
On the State:	Edith Stein: *Eine Untersuchung über den Staat*, Max Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1970, *ESGA* 7, transl. *An Investigation concerning the State*, by Marianne Sawicki, *CWES*, vol. 10, 2006.
Einführung:	Edith Stein: *Einführung in die Philosophie, ESW XIII,* 1991, *ESGA* 8.
Aufbau:	Edith Stein: *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person*, *ESW XVI,* 1993, *ESGA* 14.
EES (FEB):	*Endliches und ewiges Sein, ESW II, 1986, ESGA* 11-12, transl. *Finite and Eternal Being*, by Kurt F. Reinhardt, *CWES*, vol. 9, 2002.
ESW:	*Edith Steins Werke, Herder*
ESGA:	*Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe, Herder.* This newer, critical edition has been used when available and nothing else is indicated.
CWES:	*The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, ICS Press, Washington D.C.

Logical Investigations:	Edmund Husserl: *Logische Untersuchungen*, Niemeyer, Halle, 1900-1, transl. *Logical Investigations*, transl. J.N. Findlay from the second ed., ed. D. Moran, Routledge, London-New York, 2001.
Ideas:	Edmund Husserl: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Philosophie,* 1911, Husserliana III/1 and V, reprinted by Meiner, Hamburg, 1992 transl. *Ideas*, by Boyce Gibson, Allen and Unwin, London – Humanities Press, New York, 1931.
Ideas II:	Edmund Husserl: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Philosophie, II: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, Husserliana IV, transl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy,* Second Book (Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution) by Rojcevicz and Schuwer, Kluwer, Dordrecht – Boston – London, 1989.
CC:	*Corpus Christianorum,* Brepols, Turnhout.
PL:	Migne: *Patrologia Latina,* Garnier, Paris.
SC:	*Sources Chrétiennes*, Cerf, Paris.
CWS:	*Classics of Western Spirituality,* Paulist Press, New York – Mahwah.
Loeb:	Loeb Classical Library.
Post. Anal.	Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics.*
Nic. Eth.	Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics.*
1094a1:	Reference to Immanuel Bekker's standard edition of the Greek texts of Aristotle (1831). References consist of a page number, a column letter and a line number. Thus (1094a1) indicates column one of page 1094 of Bekker's edition, line 1.
ST:	Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae.*
AK 5:439:	Reference to volume and page-numbers in the *Akademie Ausgabe* of Kant's Works. According to custom, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, the first edition in AK 3 and the second in AK 4, are referred to as A and B. Ex.: [AK A268/B324].
Gregor CEWIK:	Immanuel Kant: *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, transl. and ed. by Mary Gregor, CUP, 1996.

CUP:	Cambridge University Press
CoUP:	Cornell University Press
CEP:	Council of Europe Publishing
CAUP:	Catholic University of America Press
HUP:	Harvard University Press
KSUP:	Kent State University Press
LEV:	Libreria Editrice Vaticana
MaUP:	Manchester University Press
MqUP:	Marquette University Press
MUP:	Michigan University Press
NWUP:	North Western University Press
OUP:	Oxford University Press
SUP:	Stanford University Press
TUP:	Toronto University Press
PUF:	Presses Universitaires de France
PUP:	Princeton University Press
UCP:	University of Chicago Press
UOP:	University of Oklahoma Press
UPA:	University Press of America
UPP:	University of Pennsylvania Press
YUP:	Yale University Press
CNRS:	Centre national de la récherche scientifique (France)
ICS:	Institute of Carmelite Studies (Washington)

- Spelling in quotations has been adjusted to ours.
- 'He' and 'she' (and 'him/his' and 'her/hers') are used interchangeably, except when used to refer to a specific person.
- Greek transcription has been used as far as possible to facilitate the reader, but large quotations have been kept in Greek lettering, as have some footnote explanations, in which spelling plays a role.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Among those who must be thanked for their contribution to the completion of this investigation are in the first place those to whom it is dedicated: my very lovely mother Janne Lebech Frederiksen, whose life and death will always remain a source of inspiration; Professor James McEvoy of Queen's University Belfast, whose friendship over the years has been not only support but also refuge; and my students in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth and Saint Patrick's College Maynooth who each have given me an additional reason to complete this work.

Many others have contributed. Among these are Professor William Desmond of the Hoger Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, whose breadth of vision allowed me to find shelter under his wings in a critical moment. Professor Peter Kemp, formerly of the Institut for Pædagogisk Filosofi, Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitet, supervised the early stages of the PhD dissertation on which this work is based, and also helped to secure funding from the *Centre for Ethics and Law* and the *Bonifaciuswerk* for it. He, together with the other members of the jury, Professors Martin Stone and Antoon Vandewelde of KUL, provided useful criticism, for which they all deserve thanks. My colleagues in the Philosophy Department of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and in particular its late Professor Thomas A.F. Kelly († 21 February 2008) lent their kind and patient support. And Dr. Hans Rainer Sepp finally accepted the work into the series *Orbis Phenomenologicus,* thus allowing it to appear in print.

The intelligent help of the interlibrary loans department in the John Paul II Library, as well as generous grants from the publication schemes of NUI, Maynooth and the National University of Ireland must also be recognised. And so must indeed those who by their critical appraisal at various stages of the manuscript's development have helped it along; thanks are due in particular to Professor Sarah Borden, Isabelle Cart-

wright, Dr. Will Desmond, Helle Gjellerup, John Haydn Gurmin, Dr. Harry McCauley, Professor Alasdair McIntyre, Dr. James McGuirk, Hilda Middelboe, Anne Lotte Mørk Hansen and Dr. Dr. Marianne Sawicki. The latter has in particular contributed insightful constructive criticism from which both I and the work has benefited much.

I hope the completed work will do justice to the joint efforts and generosity of all these people, despite the flaws which inevitably remain in it.

Celbridge, October 2008.

Introduction

This book is about human dignity; about *what* it is and *why* it is. What human dignity is constitutes a problem, because it is not obvious, even though, or perhaps precisely because, it might seem so initially. The problem of identifying exactly what human dignity is, is a problem that underlies the related problem of insuring that human dignity is recognized. We shall concern ourselves only with the first of these problems. Contributing theoretically to solve the consequent problem is possible and desirable, but it requires expertise in law, political and social science that the author does not possess. It is to be hoped, however, that people with that kind of expertise might be able to profit from our discussion of the underlying problem, in order to make advances in their respective fields.

Our problem, that of identifying exactly what human dignity is and why, surfaces when human dignity is dismissed as being merely a quaint religious dogma, a poetic conceit, a rhetorical device or a romantic ideal. It presents itself when human dignity is seen as a convenient legal fiction, a social construction or an ethnocentric belief. In all these cases it is taken for granted that the expression is meaningless, although it has some political and legal use. This again means that the ambition to found human rights on human dignity frequently is accompanied by a modicum of ironic superiority: 'human dignity is for preambles and solemn occasions, but it really doesn't have any specific content or meaning, it means anything you like'.

If it really had absolutely no meaning, however, how would we know what it was that had no meaning? How could we talk *about* human dignity? The expression must make some sense for us to want to talk about it at solemn occasions and use it in preambles. Even 'unicorn' and 'square circle' make *some* sense – we can understand what they *mean*. This book is about the meaning of the expression 'human dignity'. It is about why

we tend to use it, even those of us who thus dismiss it, and about what it refers to, when we do.

One of the more important things we believe when we 'believe' in human dignity, is that it is not an arbitrary, accidental, accessory or even unjustified idea, but that it has a necessity about it, available to and encompassing all human beings. When we pause to think about it however, we find it very hard to say where this necessity is coming from, what it relies upon, or why it is that people with contrary worldviews – believers, atheists, communists, social democrats, liberals, conservatives – share the sense of necessity, without sharing the argumentative context in terms of which they might explain it.

We all seem well aware of the advantages of having a well-grounded sense of human dignity; its function as a legal criterion is in the interest of all; it allows for a pan-cultural foundation for ethics and indeed of law; and the ethical standard it provides for respectful behaviour seems available to every human individual around the globe. The human community is too much in need of these things not to desire to have, hold and understand this notion of human dignity in a manner that does not depend on political or religious observation and ethnic identity.

The present investigation attempts to step into the void between alternative 'foundations' or 'explanations' and explain them as well as human dignity in terms of historical human experience, available to all, anywhere. What we shall argue is that human dignity is the fundamental value of the human being, that it can be understood as such in very different epistemological contexts typical of contemporary trends and that it can function as a basic principle for law and ethics because the value is indispensable to our experience as human beings.

The work is laid out as a classic phenomenological investigation moving from empirics (Part I) over eidetics (Part II) to constitution (Part III). Phenomenologists will recognize this schema from the plan of Husserl's *Ideas* and Stein's *On the Problem of Empathy.* The first step, 'empirics' investigates the empirical occurrence of the expression 'human dignity' in the Western philosophical tradition. Distinctive features and peculiarities of its historical appearances are noted. The second step, eidetics, identifies the essential contours of the idea, extracted and refined from its real-world instantiations: human dignity is *something* and *a definite something* in order to have real-world instantiations in the first place. Constitution analysis, the third step, describes how that definite something registers within human experience; how it feels or is experienced.

Thus human dignity is investigated in three modes: as a term appearing in historical texts, as a reality independent of its various historical expressions and as an experience immanently lived and liveable.

We thus attempt to identify human dignity in three complementary ways. Part I proposes a history of human dignity articulated by a succession of contexts; a cosmo-centric, a Christo-centric, a Modern and a Contemporary one. It argues that the fragments of theory to which the texts testify can be explained in terms of their context and that the idea has expressed itself most fully in our own context characterised by the human rights tradition. Earlier contexts however, have contributed genuine understandings of human dignity, which with their explanatory structures are still operative in our own pluralist context, and provide what is often termed 'foundations' for the idea.

The context-characteristic 'foundational' accounts of human dignity serve towards an eidetic analysis of the essence of human dignity in Part II, so as to test our post-modern understanding for its inclusiveness of the various traditions. Three context-representative accounts are completed by means of corresponding epistemological and ontological theories so as to assess what exactly Aristotle, Aquinas and Kant would understand human dignity to be had they granted specific attention to its *eidos*. It is shown that each of these accounts not only accord with the proposed definition, but also corroborates and elucidates it. In this manner our definition is shown to be compatible with different epistemological contexts, which otherwise may be understood to give rise to incompatible ideas of human dignity.

In Part III a constitutional analysis of human dignity, characteristic of our own context, enables us to grasp the experiential content of the idea and its existential importance. It explores the constitution of the human person and the constitution of value before combining these two in an analysis of the constitution of the fundamental value of the human being. It is shown that the recognition of human dignity is of decisive cultural and social consequence and that it is essential to human experience as we know it. It is in other words shown that human dignity is implicit in human experience as what makes it possible.

In this way the investigation proceeds from the multiplicity of interpretations (Part I) through hypothetical clarification (Part II), to existential substantiation (Part III); from texts on human dignity (Part I), which can only be understood if there is something to which they all relate (Part II), and of which we can and do have knowledge independently of

the texts themselves (Part III). This teleological structure (the emerging of the core meaning in the first parts being explained only by the final chapters) is typical of a hermeneutical investigation. The completion of the hermeneutical investigation by a phenomenological one (with its eidetic and constitutional parts) makes a similar teleological point, namely that the affirmation of human dignity occupies so central a place in human experience that its denial would render the latter unrecognisable.

This map of the investigation hopefully allows the reader to make a way through the work, beginning with, moving on to and finishing with whatever part is most appropriate to his or her interests, presuppositions and ambitions. *A Glossary of Phenomenological Terms* is provided at the end of the book, which doubles as an index of the same terms. This should allow for easy cross-checking of specific topics, and further reference.

Edith Stein's phenomenological perspective, accounting as it does in a unique way for both social construction and the phenomenon of valuation, lends itself not only to the integration of hermeneutical and phenomenological methods as necessitated by our investigation, but also to the analysis of human dignity in its phenomenal, personal and social dimensions. Stein's intersubjective value-theory allows us to conduct an analysis of human dignity as an object we constitute to be motivating us, while at the same time clarifying why we come to constitute it in this manner. As the theory enables us to distinguish between the perspectives of the 'I' and the 'we', while understanding both in their interdependence, it allows us to distinguish personal value-response and -experience from communal experience and cultural normativity, while also understanding the contribution of personal experience to communal experience. For all these reasons we have chosen to inform our phenomenological approach by Stein's philosophy in particular. Its post-modern dimension, allowing for a systematic investigation of social construction within a decisively pluralistic phenomenological perspective, also constitutes a prolongation of Husserl's phenomenology that is particularly apt to meet a contemporary demand for critical objectivity.

Our hermeneutical investigation is explicitly limited to Western European sources (or sources with direct influence in Western Europe). Eastern European, Asian, African, Oceanic and American sources would need to be taken into account in a universal study, to which what follows could serve as a 'regional' contribution. Probably the central insights of this investigation would not be radically changed by the findings of a

universal study, but it would certainly be put into context. Against the limited background of the Western European sources we can already argue that human dignity can, does, and indeed is likely to play the role of a universal cultural ideal because it can, is and indeed is likely to be identified in experience by every human being *as the importance of that experience*, regardless of the individual's tradition or culture.

Two important grammatical points must be made before we start the investigation. The English expression 'human dignity' consists of the predicate 'human' and the noun 'dignity'. The adjective qualifies the noun so as to determine the kind of dignity in question as being of the human kind. (The adjective has a similar function in the expression 'human being'. Here it qualifies the noun 'being', to determine the kind of being in question as being of the human kind.) Because of this qualification, the expression cannot function adjectively in English. That is, we cannot say, without doing violence to language, the 'human dignitiness' of someone (or 'human dignifiedness' of someone), anymore than we can say the 'human beingness' of someone. We shall show that this is because we refer, by the expression 'human dignity' to a value we by the expression designate as fundamental. A fundamental value is not essentially a quality; it is essentially fundamental, and thus it does not call for an adjectival use, only a substantive one. 'Human dignity' can function grammatically only as a substantive. Moreover: when 'human' and 'dignity' are used in conjunction they form the expression 'human dignity', which is not simply an equivalent of 'dignity'. 'Dignity' could be predicated of many different species in each their own way, whereas 'human dignity' is reserved to human beings. The combination of the terms in the expression 'human dignity' fixates the meaning of the term 'dignity', to designate a specific dignity that is characteristic of human beings. Thus to say that a dolphin's dignity is 'human dignity' remains a misattribution, and as such it lies outside the parameters of this investigation.

These things stated, we can start the investigation.

Part I
A History of Human Dignity

When reflecting on how to proceed with an investigation of human dignity, one soon comes to be haunted by what has been called the 'hermeneutical circle': the perspective of the interpreter is an unavoidable condition for the gathering and systematisation of data. The rendering explicit of presuppositions seems the only way forward, and thus we have proceeded from the assumption that the textual appearance of the expression 'human dignity' provides evidence for its use and therefore for its meaning. Nevertheless, the texts thus announcing themselves as concerned with the problem of human dignity remain closed until one unlocks them with an idea of what one expects to find. Finding such an idea is complicated by the fact that several, seemingly incompatible, ideas seem to be required by the textual material available. Thus a conceptual model is proposed of how these ideas relate. The model allows us to interpret human dignity as having one meaning conjugated according to different contexts and to interpret the texts as all concerned with the one subject under investigation. It also allows us to clarify presuppositions, eliminate prejudice and read imaginatively in the texts' proper contexts so as to gain an understanding of what the idea sought for means in the various texts investigated, in contrast with other texts, and in the larger context of us interpreting these texts.

The model of contexts proposed to clarify the meaning of the expression consists of sets of conventions accounting for the possibility of making sense generally and of conceptualising human dignity specifically. It explains how the idea has been channelled in different ways, presupposing that human dignity makes sense, both in the different contexts where the expression occurs and through these in itself as something that is and can be expressed in different contexts. The model helps us explain the development of the idea as its being conditioned by different conven-

tions colouring, shaping, promoting or preventing its conception so that the history of human dignity is written as the series of changing conditions for its conception as an idea.

The texts interpreted have been selected according to the following criteria:

1. The expression 'human dignity', and its equivalents in other languages, have been *sought out* or at least *sought after*, so that all texts considered reflect this quest for linguistic accuracy. Any other criterion would confuse the issue, given that our aim is to clarify what is meant by the expression.
2. Hence texts are included if they specifically concern human dignity (be they legal, philosophical, theological or other), and fragments of texts reflecting on human dignity by significant thinkers have been included to broaden the evidence of how human dignity has been understood.
3. Significant thinkers who do not specifically use the expression 'human dignity' but whose thought touch on related areas have not been included. Thus Plato, whose focus on *eros* does not lead him to talk about human dignity, has been left out. So has Suarez, whose natural law theory includes no explicit reflection on the substantive basis for human equality; Hegel, whose focus is not on the individual human being, nor on dignity; and Schelling, who, in his treatment of *Anerkennung* does not use the term *Würde* or *Menschenwürde*. Were such thinkers to be included one would need to formulate the idea of human dignity very clearly before the start of the investigation, so as to have a criterion to decide when the texts were concerned with it and when not. Whereas such discernment might not be strictly speaking impossible (although impracticable), it could not clarify what is meant by the expression, nor could it make any more plausible any definition of the idea which it proposed: it would only show that the idea proposed was dealt with by whatever thinkers were chosen. This procedure might prove fruitful for a single-context investigation, but it could not yield a cross-context investigation of human dignity, and it has therefore not been adopted.
4. Works concerned with dignity rather than with human dignity, for example Schiller's *Über Anmut und Würde*, have as a rule not been included. They have however, been discussed if their use of

'dignity' is particularly enlightening, and this is indeed often the case.

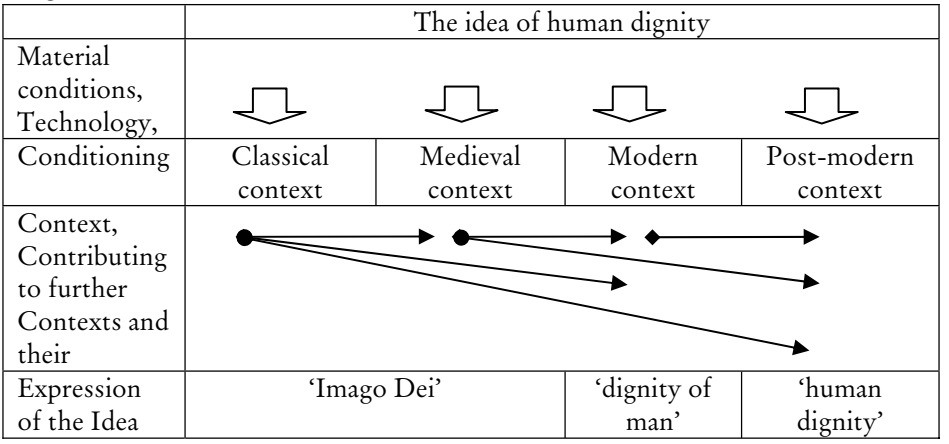
Our model thus allows for one idea of human dignity which makes sense in different contexts, each of these contexts in turn representing an epoch in Western European history. The contexts get defined from the outside by their differences and from the inside by the way in which a characteristic understanding of human dignity is generated in each of them. Difference is revealed by other worldviews co-existing with it (not sharing its presuppositions) so that contexts tend to be localised in space and time, seemingly related to stable material conditions which condition the general point of view. The change of contexts appears conditioned from below by the development of new technology, as it changes traditional patterns of social organization and leads to changes in the conventions about social status, the understanding of virtue and the explanation of things. Individuals take a number of attitudes in relation to contexts: they adopt them, endorse them, defend them or reject them; they can also move between them and question them. Sometimes rules for 'conversion' apply, at other times it is possible for individuals to partake in several contexts, whether because of confusion or by means of a personal or cultural synthesis. Co-existing contexts are as porous as are the groups identified by them. It remains that to adopt a context one must have knowledge about its possibility (either from the inside or from the outside) and consider its conventions convincing, practicable or true.[1]

For the model to work as a heuristic instrument the number of contexts it brings into relation with one another must be manageable. Some differences will have to recede to make others decisive, and to make the

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre's understanding of rivalling traditions of moral rationality is comparable to our understanding of varying contexts, as is Agnes Heller's understanding of the competition between authorities (MacIntyre, Alasdair: *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, Duckworth, London, 1990; Heller, Agnes: *A Theory of Modernity*, Blackwell, Malden – Oxford, 1999). Wils, Jean-Pierre: 'The End of "Human Dignity" in Ethics?' in *Concilium*, June 1989, pp. 39-54 suggests a 'classification of types' of understandings of human dignity including the four we suggest among several others, thus also attempting a classification akin to ours, although he does not attribute the difference in types to the different contexts. It has been remarked that our understanding of contexts also has similarities with Foucault's '*episteme*', *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Gallimard, Paris, 1966.

interpretation it renders possible salient. Our model, represented in fig. 1, allows for four contexts (and not three or seven) because this seems to fit the uses of the expression and explain them, both historically and now.[2] The contexts are supposed to feed into one another: on the one hand by the moving on from one context to the next by historical development and on the other by presenting an imaginable (possible) world-view to succeeding contexts. As the model is the means of the interpretation, its justification is the whole of the investigation it renders possible (Part I), but the amount and variety of textual evidence for the use of the expression 'human dignity' makes the investigation impracticable without some model.

Fig. 1.



The conventions of importance for a context-specific understanding of human dignity can be classified as *ethical* (concerning virtue, personal life, status, right and duty); *socio-political and legal* (concerning the nature of law and society); *metaphysical and religious* (concerning the place of the human being in the cosmos, its relation to the divine and its destiny) and *epistemological and logical* (concerning what it means for something to be what it is, the nature of rationality and what it means for a being to be rational or intelligent). Such conventions, once established, function as factors of social integration; they are *topoi* which make people of the same

[2] It is possible, however, to imagine another useful model allowing for three, five, six or seven contexts, but then the corresponding historical periods would not be the classically accepted ones that we have adopted.

worldview identifiable to one another and they have therefore a tendency to perpetuate themselves as they maintain a common frame for communication. They are intelligible by their function as factors that integrate groups or periods, conditioning value-response in their temporal or physical environment.[3] The model enables us therefore to highlight not only differences between contexts conditioning the conception of human dignity, but also cultural obstacles to the development of the understanding of the idea. Contexts, in fact, – unlike theories of human dignity – need not be consistent in the sense of generating logically coherent understandings of human dignity. They are in contrast consistent in producing or conditioning a specific type of understanding, characteristic perhaps by its type of logical or internal *in*consistency, which may indeed be explicable by the practical impossibility of recognising in practice what coherence would indicate in theory. Female and black voices, often producing what seems to be a shift of topic, a breach in style or a disturbing element, is a case in point. The disturbance these voices produce brings to attention that their authors have often been understood both to have and not have human dignity, and the texts in which they sound awkward document a type of operation typical of contexts, which cannot so easily be captured in single-context analyses. The voices reveal the hidden conventions, awkwardness being interpreted as a sign of contexts being disturbed without being changed.

Such awkwardness is by no means unimportant to the development of the idea – on the contrary. As it happens, the expression 'human dignity' seems to emerge rather slowly from contexts where 'dignity' was used to appreciate the importance of various human individuals in contrast with other individuals who were not thought to possess it to the same degree. 'Human dignity' probably became part of current usage at the same time and for the same reasons as the expression 'human person', i.e. to designate the fundamental value or importance of the human individual as such. The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* testifies to the currency of both terms, and within the human rights tradition flowing from the *Universal Declaration*, the term is constantly used to express the basic intuition from which human rights proceed. It is meant as the basic principle upon which human rights rest, and it is said to be

[3] Chapter 9 accounts for values playing the role of integrating communities. The presuppositions making up contexts are conventions that *condition* value-response, i.e. render the adoption of some values more likely (easier) than others.

inherent and inalienable in each and every person. This means that 'human dignity' comes to currency as an expression in a context we must call post-modern, if we understand the Second World War to have shattered the confidence in the subject associated with Modernity. But the idea that comes to expression has of course a history before that which is the history of how it found expression and progressively became a current expression. The idea has a no less dramatic history after the *Universal Declaration* – ending in today's discussions of who or what ought to count as a human being having human dignity, a discussion to which this book contributes.

To begin our investigation we shall now trace how the expression 'human dignity' came to be current, and also what happened to the idea once the expression had gained currency. This we shall do (in this Part I, chapters 1-4) so as to attempt to find out what the expression 'human dignity' can plausibly be thought to mean (something which we shall further investigate in Part II, chapters 5-8).

Chapter 1
Human Dignity in the Cosmo-centric Context

Nature, or the cosmos, was in ancient times a widely-accepted explanatory factor. Trade necessitated a *topos* to which all had equal access and the ever-present, ever self-renewing nature (*physis*, *natura*), or, to use the Greek term that underlines the intelligibility and beauty of it, *kosmos*, fitted the bill. Religion and politics were both, in contrast, characteristic of individual peoples and hence controversial or divisive. The cosmo-centric paradigm arising from holding in common the beauty of nature and its inherent intelligibility gave impetus to philosophy and science, empowering individuals to observe growing things and to understand their purpose. The focus on nature successfully balanced the worship of fertility and order appealing to the civilised individual who lived not only as a member of a tribe or clan but also as a citizen. Nature counted as common ground, equal to all, generous, self-regulating and self-renewing: the same for all the peoples who eventually had to accept the *Pax Romana*. If social organisation needed justification or regulation, it could be done with reference to this basic explanatory factor; slavery was considered to be 'natural'; and ethical or religious practices, when abhorred by the many, considered 'against nature'. The paradigm is still intelligible and adhered to by many. It can be argued that nature is more stable than technology, politics and religion, and that it must be reckoned with for the regularity of its cycles, its regenerative powers, its resources, and its intelligibility across language barriers, social divisions and religious divides. Taking this for granted opens up the cosmo-centric context.

Aristotle and the Concept of Dignity

Aristotle (384-22 BC) was committed to nature's intelligibility and became therefore *the* philosopher of the cosmo-centric context. He defined nature (*physis*) in five ways as the 'growth of growing things'; 'the primary, immanent element in a thing from which its growth proceeds'; 'the source from which the primary movement in each natural object is present in it in virtue of its own essence'; the 'primary matter from which any non-natural object consists', and finally, as 'the substance of natural objects'.[4] He thus perceived nature to be on the one hand the source of change in living things and on the other their intelligibility – thus raising to the status of a central philosophical concept a paradox that had puzzled his predecessors. This conceptualisation helped no doubt to lend to the term *ousia*, which the Latins translated variously with *essentia* or *substantia,* its familiar association with material things. And it also helped to associate nature and being in what later was to become known as metaphysics.

We must presuppose this centrality of nature if we are to understand the fragments of theory of relevance to our subject found in Aristotle. Aristotle could perhaps rely on his contemporaries to accept that the nature of human beings is rational, and could also trust them to accept the definition of the human being as a 'rational animal' without too many questions. Human dignity could then be understood as implicit in human nature, it being somehow associated with reason. But if we attempt to render explicit what is implicit in this idea, it soon becomes clear that it is not properly articulated, much less analysed, by Aristotle.

However, the notion of *dignity* is used by him, and that in a two-fold manner. Linguistically speaking there is no one Greek word which accurately translates all of what we understand by 'dignity' and nothing but it. Those who are dignified are *hoi axioi* (the worthy) or indeed *hoi en axiomati* (those in position), whereas *hoi timaioi* are the fear-inspiring, the awesome, those to whom *time* is the appropriate attitude. However, Aristotle also claims that *time* is the most coveted of external goods due to personal *axia*. *Time* in turn is translated by 'honor' in Latin and 'honour' in English. The reason for us focussing on the family of words related to

[4] *Metaphysics*, V, 4 (1014b17-15a17), translation from *The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. by J. Barnes, OUP, Princeton, 1984.

axia is that the Latin translators of Aristotle translated both *axioma* and *axia* more or less systematically by *dignitas*.[5] Due to the immense influence Aristotle had on the thought of the middle ages, dignity, accordingly, has in its development as a concept drawn upon the meanings expressed in these terms so that the medieval *dignitas* refers to personal value on the one hand (desert or merit, i.e. what confers rights) and to a non-demonstrable fundamental principle, on the other. The proper attitude towards both could be said to be respect (expressed by different words such as *time*, fear or honour, or *observantia*, observance). It is thus no coincidence that the Greek words of the *axia*-family stem from the same root, although it is quite possible that Aristotle was not conscious of the relatedness of *axia* and *axioma* in the sense of a fundamental principle (our sense of axiom). All the same the words of this family refer in all cases to something of importance, something esteemed, something that must be respected.[6] A similar family-likeness makes the Romans use *dignitas* to mean an office involving duties and entitlements all deriving from it as well as a quality for which one should have respect. In English we talk about a 'school-principal', a 'principle' and even a 'prince' – all words that reflect respectability in this sense. We also talk about the 'price' of goods, the 'prize' and the 'praise' given, as well as the 'appraisal' of something. The relatedness of these words (which can be seen from them being related in other European languages as well[7]) illustrates how words can be related without native speakers being particularly aware of it. The semantic background of the Greek translated by the term 'digni-

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[5] See *Posterior Analytics* I,VII (75a38-75b3), I,X (76b13-15) and *Nicomachean Ethics* IV,3 (1123a34-25a31). All translations consulted in the *Aristoteles Latinus* edition include the same translation of both *axioma* and *axia* by *dignitas.*

[6] *Liddell and Scott* encourages the etymological conception that ἄξιος (originally from ἄγτιος, valuable/worthy) and ἀξιόω (I value/consider worthy/honour/observe/consider appropriate/expect/claim/demand) are derived from ἄγω, meaning lead, bring, carry, with a secondary sense related to weighing: to draw down the scales, to weigh. It is easy to see how importance and weight are related, and how the term in this manner in its origin is a term of relation. Ἀξία often simply means price, value, amount or the estimation of a thing's value. Ἀξίωμα, in turn, means the result of the estimation of the value/the estimated value/what one is judged worthy of/a position/what is regarded as right. Hence our sense of axiom.

[7] French: Prix, prix, apprecier; German: Preis, Preis, preisen; Danish: Pris, pris, prise.

tas', means that this term quite likely 'originally' had a similar gamut of connotations.[8] This, in turn, can explain why dignity, when used in the expression 'human dignity', has a spectrum of senses, including that of a basic value, a principle and an attribute, all relational realities referring to importance that needs to be observed.

Let us therefore, in our quest for expressions semantically related to human dignity, look at Aristotle's uses of *axioma* and *axia*, and let us start with what is least surprising; his use of both terms to designate personal worth.

We shall find what we are looking for in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle treats of value (*axia*) in three contexts[9] (all translated by *dignitas* or derivatives of *dignus* in Latin). In modern day English *axia* is often rendered by 'desert', 'merit' or 'claim', occasioning the reader to overlook the linguistic connection, and presenting a point of view according to which the social consequences of worth is being underlined at the expense of the 'ontological' value of the person. For Aristotle these two (what is seen to be and what is) are complementary, and this means the translation is perfectly justified, and also, due to the construction of the Greek sentences, difficult to avoid. In the same way that value (*axia*) is an ontological characteristic as much as it presents a claim to have social or interpersonal consequences following from it, 'merit', 'desert' or 'claim' can also be claimed to have an ontological basis, although they are of course first and foremost social realities.

The following passage brings out these problems (we have made whatever is translated by or translates *dignus* or its derivatives stand out in bold in the Greek and the English which accompanies the Latin, and moreover underlined the term when the Greek rendered was not only *axia*/ἀξία, but *axioma*/ἀξίωμα):

Η δὲ μεγαλοψυχία περὶ μεγάλα μὲν καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ὀνόματος ἔοικεν εἶναι, περὶ ποῖα δ' ἐστὶ πρῶτον	Magnanimitas autem circa magna quidem et ex nomine videtur esse. Circa qualia autem est primum accipiamus. Differt autem nihil habitum	Pride seems even from its name to be concerned with great things; what sort of great things, is the first question we must try to

[8] Lewis and Short make *dignus* stem from *dicnus*, and this in turn derive from the Sanscrit *daç*, meaning fame, whereas they see *doceo*, wherefrom *decet* and *decus* stem, as deriving from the Greek *doxa*, also meaning fame.

[9] *Nic. Eth.* IV, 3 (1123a34-25a31); V, 3 (1131a10-28) and VIII, 8 (1159a32-b1).