

Towards a political concept of dignity

Samuel Harrison

University of Cambridge

Abstract: This paper proposes a new way of thinking about the concept of dignity. It argues that existing conceptions of dignity in moral and legal philosophy fail to meet three key tests: conceptual soundness, analytical usefulness, and a capacity to vindicate the principle of moral egalitarianism. It suggests that we can better satisfy all three of these conditions if we treat dignity as a relational and political concept that is defined by a sense of what we are due. This means its content derives not from any transcendental truth or legal authority, but has to be negotiated between different actors. It can then be asserted as part of an egalitarian project without needing to make reference to an external authority or a confused conceptual base. It seeks to show that this understanding of dignity is free of the conceptual confusion that plagues the existing conceptions; is closer to the 'common' understanding of dignity in ordinary language and thus more analytically useful; and finally can be deployed more successfully in defence of the principle of moral equality.

Keywords: dignity; moral philosophy; legal philosophy; egalitarianism; universalism; Arab Spring

Introduction

Perhaps the most incisive theorist of the concept of dignity is Bradley Pearson, protagonist of Iris Murdoch's novel *The Black Prince*, who remarks: 'One of the many respects [...] in which life is unlike art is this: characters in art can have unassailable dignity, whereas characters in life have none. Yet of course life, in this respect as in others, pathetically and continually aspires to the condition of art. A sheer concern for one's dignity, a sense of form, a sense of style, inspires more of our baser actions than any conventional analysis of possible sins is likely to bring to light' (Murdoch 2003). In short: dignity is always easier to describe as ideal than as reality, and those who pursue it will usually make fools of themselves. Consider this a health warning as we plough into the thorny problem of dignity.

The term 'dignity' has undergone something of a crisis in recent years. Critics allege that it is too ambiguous and self-contradictory to be of any use to scholars. David Mattson and Susan Clark (2011) go as far as to claim that 'the concept of dignity is in such disarray that it does not provide even a minimally stable frame for global discourse and action'. There are many examples that could support this contention but to give just one: in 2011 revolutionaries across the Arab world called for economic justice and political freedom in the name of dignity, and just three years later the would-be dictator General Haftar of Libya called his bloody campaign against the country's Islamists 'Operation Dignity', both using the same word, كرامة (*karāma*). When both revolutionary movements and authoritarian leaders can appeal to 'dignity' to support their actions, it is difficult not to see the term as a conceptual quagmire.

Many theorists of dignity have sought to cut through the confusion and rescue the idea by offering strict, normative definitions of the concept. These efforts have tended to fall into one of two camps: one treating dignity as an ethical concept, the other arguing that its roots are more properly in the law. The former position draws on a long tradition that associates

dignity with the notion that human beings enjoy a universal moral equality, a link that is most commonly attributed to Kantian ethics. It treats dignity as an essential, universal quality, specific to human beings, that acts as a guarantee of moral equality. The legal conception of dignity, meanwhile, has focused largely on the nature of dignity as a status, quality or virtue, and on the task of interpreting the relationship between dignity and rights.

Although these two schools of dignity have sometimes crossed swords, they have a common aim: to devise and vindicate a conception of dignity capable of underpinning the principle that all human beings have equal and inviolable rights and may not be subjected to degrading treatment (Rosen 2012; Waldron 2012). As such, both theories share a commitment to dignity as an intrinsically universal and inalienable title held on an equal basis by all human beings, one that is in some sense linked with rights and that acts as a guarantee against their violation. Both maintain this commitment by excluding those uses of dignity that conflict with it.

Yet there is growing recognition that the conceptual problems plaguing dignity today stem from these two approaches' common insistence on treating it as an essentially egalitarian and universalist concept. In Colin Bird's (2013) account, efforts to engineer dignity such as to make it consistently serve egalitarian purposes have left us with a concept of dignity that is of neither analytical or political use: it cannot explain what dignity *does* in political language, nor is it capable of mobilising support for egalitarian political projects. As such, they have been unable to rescue dignity from its critics.

This has also caused problems in the wider world. Because the legal and ethical accounts of dignity both rest on the idea that egalitarian dignity is justified by an external, sometimes transcendental authority, they have created the impression that the egalitarian conception of dignity is beyond question: it can only be asserted as a fact, not advanced and argued as a point of principle. This renders the concept vulnerable. If people stop believing in it as a

matter of course, and there is no longer any means of persuading them of its truth, then it is liable to implode.

As such, we are in need of a new approach to dignity, one that is more a) conceptually watertight, b) analytically useful, and c) capable of vindicating moral equality. In this paper, I argue that these three aims are best realised by removing dignity from the two dominant existing fields, ethics and law, and positioning it instead in the realm of the political. I will first set out the cartography of the modern debate over the meaning and applications of dignity, indicating the analytical and practical limitations of its existing conceptions. I will then propose an alternative approach, treating dignity not as a static innate quality or as a status that all human beings enjoy unconditionally, but as a political relation between different agents (human and institutional alike), one that is subject to constant renegotiation.

This means abandoning the traditional approach, whereby theorists seek to impose a predefined dignity on the world to fulfil a predetermined end, and instead allowing our definition of the term to arise from real-world uses of dignity. Based on this alternative method, I present a novel way of understanding dignity as linked with a sense of what we are due from others and from ourselves. I believe this can pass all three of the tests above: it will liberate dignity from conceptual confusion; bring it closer to ordinary language and thus more useful as an analytical tool; and provide a more effective means of defending moral egalitarianism, by allowing it to be asserted and defended as a political principle and not simply asserted as a matter of fact.

Theories of dignity make up a rich field and it would be impossible to discuss the full range of scholarship here, so I will instead focus on a few key surveys. This has meant addressing myself purely to definitions of dignity that have arisen in western philosophy, an unfortunate limitation at a time when there is a flourishing literature on dignity in other traditions. Qianfan Zhang's (2016) comparison of the western dignity tradition with concepts

in Chinese philosophy and Doris Schroeder and Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr's (2017) study of dignity in Islam are important reminders of the transnational range and multiple roots of modern ideas regarding dignity. I have likewise been unable to engage more than superficially with the abundant scholarship exploring dignity's complex role in discourses of race and gender, which, as many critics have pointed out, itself presents a serious challenge to dignity's egalitarian and universalist pretensions (Scott 2011, Frevert 2020). However, I hope to provide a framework that will be helpful for future studies that include or focus specifically on these topics.

Dignity in moral and legal philosophy

This section examines the understandings of dignity that exist in contemporary moral and legal philosophy. I argue that the conceptions of dignity devised within both of these branches of philosophy suffer from conceptual incoherencies that prevent them from fulfilling their own stated aim of upholding the moral equality of all human beings, and that they cannot account for the ways in which dignity is actually used in language. Here "moral" and "legal" should not be taken as completely distinct categories: most moral conceptions of dignity are interested in the link with rights and most legal conceptions of dignity are concerned with the criterion of moral treatment. However, as we shall see, theorists of dignity tend to conceive of themselves as contributing to one or the other field of study, and as such I will also honour this imperfect distinction. Finally, I address proposals within moral philosophy to replace dignity with a more analytically rigorous concept, arguing that for all its faults, it is still worth holding on to dignity.

The moral conception of dignity

The traditional understanding of dignity in moral philosophy is also its most recognisable form. It conceives of dignity as an inalienable quality, integral to and universal among human beings. It demands the respect of others, guarantees its holder a certain standard of

treatment and is frequently cited as a guarantee against various forms of mistreatment. It has sometimes been taken as the grounds of human rights (Beitz 2013; Goodhart 2020; Mosissa 2020). Its influence has been enormous, especially in international and constitutional law, yet it has been the object of philosophical scepticism for at least fifty years (Pritchard 1972). Among its most influential representatives is George Kateb (2011), who describes his own conception as “existential” in place of “moral” for valid and salient reasons, but who nonetheless uses it in the manner described above, as a guarantee of universal and respect for human rights and a certain level of equal moral treatment.

One of the primary objections to the moral conception of dignity is that its essentialism, its conviction that dignity belongs intrinsically to human beings, has put it at odds with a changing intellectual climate. Traditionally a major advantage of human dignity for rights language was its capacity to ground the claim that all human beings have equal rights in some universal quality (Debes 2009, 53). Yet, as Antonio Autiero (2020) argues, its appeal to an essential humanity strikes an increasingly discordant tone at a time when feminist and other emancipatory critiques are keen to stress the particularity of different social identities against a supposed universal human essence that would flatten them. Critics have also found troubling the tendency among some of its theorists to link dignity with a specific human capacity, such as rationality (Korsgaard 1996) or the capacity for evaluation (Forst 2015). While this move bolsters the strength of the concept of dignity by anchoring it in a recognisably human characteristic, it leaves its advocates with the unsavoury implication that those with a greater such capacity may then claim superior moral worth to others (Zylberman 2016; Sangiovanni 2017). Equally problematic, for Avishai Margalit (2011), is our tendency to employ this kind of dignity only to appeal against various forms of humiliating suffering inflicted by other human beings. There is a danger, he warns, of a form of dignity that commits us to regarding all human beings either as victims or as lofty, near-divine creatures.

An alternative means of salvaging the moral conception of dignity could be to soften its commitment to equal moral treatment. Remy Debes (2009, 59-60) suggests that we should understand dignity as a guarantor of “unearned worth” rather than of “equal worth”. In this sense it offers a guarantee of a minimum standard of moral treatment rather than one of equal moral treatment. He also leaves open the possibility that some people do not enjoy this guarantee. In his hands dignity becomes something like citizenship of a country: all those who have it benefit equally from a basic standard of moral treatment, but it does not foreclose any unequal treatment beyond that standard; and not everyone is necessarily entitled to it, although there is no reason why they should not have it. His work has been a vital step in opening dignity up to competing interpretations, but it does not solve the problem of essentialism, because although Debes is willing to risk the possibility that dignity might be differentiated between human beings or even denied to some of them, he is (laudably) determined to ensure that it is not, and can find no means of doing so other than insisting that it must necessarily and intrinsically apply to all human beings by virtue of its definition. This leads him inexorably back towards capacity arguments, the shortcomings of which we have laid out above.

It is possible to extract the barbs of essentialism by insisting that human beings are all worthy of equal dignity on account of our humanity, thereby resting dignity on the sole attribute that does unarguably belong to all human beings. This idea can be found in Charles Taylor (1994) and in more detailed form in Suzy Killmister (2020). This certainly buttresses the universalism of dignity, but only by shifting the onus of maintaining it on to the category of ‘human’, which itself can all too easily be redefined to exclude certain people, by categorising them as ‘subhuman’ or even ‘inhuman’. Moreover, it makes our definition of dignity tautologous: humans must be treated equally because they are all equally human. On the other side of the coin, this dignity that belongs specifically to human beings has proved difficult to reconcile with a growing interest in extending protections against mistreatment to non-human beings. It is perhaps harder today than it once was to argue that, for example,

certain animals which are routinely slaughtered for their meat, despite their recognised intelligence, lack rationality and thus the protections accorded by dignity. Indeed, today even certain rivers have been given legal personhood, with the rights that entails. This makes it harder than it once was to define the boundaries of humanity, or at least to defend the saliency of that boundary (Statman 2000; Etinson 2020). It is true that some theorists do not think this should trouble us. Debes (2009 51, 61), suggests that if apes or rocks should end up benefiting from our definition of human dignity, so much the better for them, so long as it simultaneously incorporates all humans. But to accept this we would have to stray very far from what most people would understand by the term 'dignity'. In sum, the essentialism and anthropocentrism of the moral conception of dignity have made it increasingly incoherent and inapplicable.

The legal conception of dignity

Undoubtedly the most influential legal theory of dignity, one that indeed asserts that dignity's natural habitat is in the law, is that of Jeremy Waldron. Waldron (2012) argues that human dignity describes, not an internal quality, but a status. In his account, the modern 'status' of dignity is a universalised version of the status that historically belonged to the nobility. He dates this universalisation to the early nineteenth century, when some thinkers, especially under the influence of the Romantic tradition, began to locate dignity in ordinariness, even trumpeting this quotidian dignity over that of the nobility. In the process, Waldron suggests, it gained its current function in law of guaranteeing equal rights for all human beings – which are in essence just a universal version of the privileges that nobles could claim before the law.

In historical terms, his account is self-consciously schematic, but it does have a ring of truth about it (Strange and Cribb 2014). That we are living in a transvalued world is evident from the fact that not only is dignity afforded to everyone, but it is now far more likely to

pertain to the simple and decent than to grandeur, pomp or circumstance. But is modern, egalitarian dignity really a direct descendant of noble dignity? It is by no means certain that noble status would have survived the universalising process that Waldron describes. After all, universalising a positive status tends to have the effect of negating it, as James Baldwin (1965) observes: 'Where everyone has status, it is also perfectly possible, after all, that no one has. It seems inevitable, in any case, that a man may become uneasy as to just what his status is.' This is all the more true of noble dignity, which after all served primarily to distinguish the aristocratic in-group from the commoner out-group. The very essence of this dignity was to be particular to a certain group. Its universalisation would also have been its negation.

It is also unclear in what capacity we enjoy Waldron's universalised noble status. If it is as human beings, then Waldron risks straying back into essentialism. Once again, there must be some basis on which humans and not, say, animals or rivers have 'dignity'. As such, we are once again burdened with the task of defining and defending the boundaries of 'humanity'. We might further note that other writers on dignity have not been convinced that such a 'fundamental' human status can exist independently of other identities, asserting rather that our universal essence can only be expressed through our particularities. Hannah Arendt recognised this with regard to Jewish refugees in the early 1940s, about whom she wrote: 'they create the uncanny impression, in their complete dependence upon the compassion of others, in their naked mere-humanity, of something utterly inhuman' (Arendt 2007; Isaac 1996). And such an approach leads us to an uncomfortably Eurocentric picture of dignity. It can seem as if Waldron is suggesting that everyone on the planet now enjoys the status once accorded to a seventeenth-century English lord.

If, on the other hand, we enjoy this status by virtue of a social or civic identity, such as citizenship, Waldron runs into a different set of problems, as this would suggest that each nationality could have its own specific dignity, different from any other (Waldron 2012,

Herzog 2012, Bird 2013). This would not be beyond the bounds of reason – Aharon Barak (2015) has argued that dignity plays a different role in each nation according to that nation's history. But Barak can be content with this conclusion because his concern is to theorise the role of dignity in modern constitutions, not to confirm its normative force (Kass 2008). It sits more uneasily with the universalist dignity that Waldron seeks to vindicate, and with the emancipatory hopes that are vested in egalitarian formulations of dignity more widely. His legal conception of dignity is ultimately incapable of vindicating a dignity whose telos is to guarantee an equal and acceptable standard of moral treatment.

Giving up on dignity

Some theorists, aware of these problems, have proposed an alternative means of vindicating the content of dignity: abandoning the term itself and finding or devising a different concept that would more successfully defend its stated aim, that of securing equal treatment. This has become an increasingly common expedient amongst moral philosophers especially (Statman 2000; Zhang 2016; Gilibert 2018). The most comprehensive exercise in this area has come from Andrea Sangiovanni (2017), who describes dignity as an analytically useless notion, incapable of adequately explaining why we are to treat each other as moral equals. The best way of saving dignity, he suggests, is to bury it.

To make this argument, Sangiovanni argues that our commitment to equal treatment of human beings is based initially on the rejection of the principle of moral inequality, not on any obligation to human dignity. If the denial of inequality is conceptually prior to our commitment to equality, he argues, then our primary task is not to vindicate equal and respectful moral treatment of human beings (the role that dignity has traditionally fulfilled), but to theorise a means of condemning unequal and demeaning moral treatment. As such, there should be a shift in focus away from theorising about dignity, and towards the rejection of what he calls 'social cruelty', which he defines as the '*unauthorized, harmful, and wrongful*

use of another's vulnerability to attack or obliterate their capacity to develop and maintain an integral sense of self.'

The problem with Sangiovanni's framework is that 'social cruelty' does not seem more successful than dignity in justifying moral equality. In fact, it suffers contradictions that dignity was at least able to accommodate, even if it could not solve them. As we saw above, Sangiovanni describes as 'social cruelty' acts that deny people their ability to cultivate their 'sense of self'. The self in question is divided, in his schema, between two interdependent entities, the 'creating self' and the 'acting self', of which the former produces a character that the latter inhabits. This all works perfectly well until it comes up against the problem of social conventions, which, however harmless they might be, seem to be an insurmountable hindrance to the absolute sovereignty of the creating self. Indeed, within Sangiovanni's framework, social conditioning can only be oppressive, insofar as it represents a challenge to, perhaps even the suppression of, our creating self.

Sangiovanni is well aware of this, and responds that the development of the creating self remains free provided it is not impeded in *absorbing* these social influences as ambivalences, contradictions and regrets. But a critic of a phenomenological bent might respond that this qualification does not prohibit even the most oppressive and demeaning treatment, because there is no possible means of preventing a consciousness from assimilating its experiences in the manner of its choosing (Sartre 1943). This objection might seem glib, but the task of distinguishing a self that has been prevented from absorbing its social influences according to its own choice from one that has not is patently not straightforward, since there is no way of retrieving the hypothetical alternative self at which someone might have arrived either without those influences or through a 'freer' process of absorption. It also creates the confusing implication that the healthier a person's processing of trauma they have experienced at the hands of others, the less 'socially cruel' their treatment was in retrospect. 'Social cruelty' turns out to contain all the conceptual confusion

of dignity, but without the weathering of prior scholarship that gave us some purchase on the original concept.

This suggests that we should resist the temptation to dispense with dignity and start again with a new concept. Both 'social cruelty' and 'dignity' are wracked with ambiguity, but as in the long history of dignity we have at least succeeded in clearing some paths through its thickets, we can at least use our intuitive grasp of what it entails to steer a course through the confusion. An artificial, conceptually-engineered alternative offers us no such recourse. It is therefore still worthwhile to seek a new and clearer definition of the term, as this paper seeks to do.

In sum: both established approaches to the universalist conception of dignity run into severe conceptual and historical difficulties in their quest to uphold moral equality, nor does either approach seem to bear much resemblance to the ways in which dignity is used in ordinary language. These issues have not been resolved either by conceptual redesign or by attempts to jettison the idea entirely and start afresh. The next section will lay out an alternative approach.

Defining 'dignity' politically

Sangiovanni is correct that at present, the conceptions of dignity that we have provide inadequate support for the principle of moral equality. But we should not respond to this inconvenience either by continually trimming the edges from dignity until it adequately justifies moral equality, nor by abandoning it when it fails to do so. Instead, we should devise a conception of dignity that is unburdened by the need to vindicate universal moral equality in all instances. If we recognise not only that the universality in dignity is essentially contingent, but that it has been established, and can only be maintained, through political action, we can arrive at a more comprehensive and more analytically useful conception of

dignity. Dignity should thus be reconceptualised as a site of political contestation, one that is already overcharged with values and thus not predetermined by any of them, that can be vested with egalitarian, universalist content only through acts of will.

Here it is important to clarify what I am proposing. There is nothing novel, of course, about understanding dignity as a concept with political implications, nor as a concept that is employed “from below” by popular movements. Among the many theorists to have done both these things we could cite, among many others, Zaynab El Bernoussi (2021), who explores the ways in which Egyptian revolutionaries criticised what they understood as a humiliating political and social order and laid claim to the dignity to which they were entitled; Francis Fukuyama (2018), who ascribes a sense of wounded dignity to recent populist upheavals; or Colin Bird (2021), who theorises a relational conception of dignity that he hopes can be used to assess political institutions (on which more later).

What I am doing differently is proposing a concept of dignity that does not simply have political consequences, but that is essentially located in the political and can only be properly understood as political. This does not mean that it is devoid of legal and moral content or implications: evidently, all three of these categories are bound up together. I will try to explicate the difference with some comparisons. While Bernoussi, for example, shows how the Arab Spring protesters demanded dignity, she believes that the kind of dignity they were demanding was a pre-defined moral egalitarian concept: “[a] dignity unrelated to status is a dignity that is inherent in everyone, regardless of who they are or even what they are [...] such dignity might be what makes the kernel of the individual”. Her methodology is the same as that of the moral and legal schools: to circumscribe the definition of dignity in the same way as then to work her way through existing concepts of dignity in order to find it, discarding in the process those that do not fit (Bernoussi 2021, 2-3). My argument is that in employing the term dignity we always also redefine it. As such I propose a methodology

more in line with that of the history political thought: working out what a concept means to those who use it in specific contexts.

My approach has more in common with Fukuyama's moral-psychological account of dignity. He is much more open to the idea that dignity means different things to different people and at different times, and his conception of dignity is relational, consisting in a demand for recognition from others. He also observes the possibility that dignity will work in non-egalitarian directions. However, Fukuyama's aims with this dignity are quite different from mine. He takes a world-historical approach, seeking to explain how it is that in the present day we have vested our political aspirations in a vision of dignity that consists in individual freedom and civil equality. The conception of dignity that I am laying out here has a more granular purpose: to give us the tools to explain what it is that a person means when they use the word 'dignity' in political language.

In this section I argue that, understood in this way, a political conception of dignity can better fulfil the three criteria I proposed in the introduction: to be a) conceptually sounder, b) analytically more useful and c) better able to vindicate moral equality than either of the existing approaches. To this end I suggest a redefinition of dignity in terms of dues. I will first explore how this idea might work and address some potential objections to it, striving to demonstrate that it is conceptually sound. I will then indicate why it more closely matches the way in which we use dignity in ordinary language, with the result that it can help us to make sense of the ways in which 'dignity' is actually used – rendering it more analytically useful than the older traditions. Finally, I will show how this political conception of dignity can provide a more compelling case for moral egalitarianism.

Redefining dignity politically

We have seen that some theorists have dismissed dignity as too conceptually confused to define, and that the task of defining it one way or another has indeed caused conceptual

problems. However, this does not prove that dignity is impossible to rescue. Waldron is surely right to argue that, like a number of ethically-charged terms, dignity is not a bundle of vagaries but a contested concept, characterised by determinate ideas struggling for pre-eminence (Waldron 2013; also LaVaque-Manty 2017, Rolston 2008). And if the term is used hypocritically or cynically, then dignity is in good company alongside 'independence', 'liberty', 'democracy', 'justice' and 'equality'. So it would be wrong to dismiss dignity as hopelessly confused. At the same time, attempting, as Waldron and others have, to negate this confusion by engineering a single 'true' definition of dignity is to miss an opportunity. We should instead take seriously the notion that dignity can serve many purposes without this necessarily making it internally incoherent.

Drawing inspiration from Robin Dillon's (1995) suggestion that dignity has so often been used to stand in for other concepts that this placeholder quality has itself become part of the definition of dignity, we can allow its flexibility, its capacity to serve all sides of an argument, to inform our definition. This means refusing to predefine dignity by any single positive trait (be that rationality, divine blessing, or innate humanity) or as a contingent legal status, and instead making use of a bottom-up definition, understanding dignity as a term whose meaning derives from the specific demands that its immediate user wants to make. Such an agnosticism regarding its specific content will then allow it to account for apparently contradictory understandings of dignity.

This does not, however, mean that dignity lacks any concrete definition, and simply means whatever its user wants it to mean. I want to propose that there is a logic that underpins all actual uses of the term 'dignity': the idea of *getting what one feels is one's due*. Since this idea does not contain any prior assumption about what a person *should* feel they are due, nor indeed any prior assumption that what one person is due should also be due to everyone, it leaves our understanding of dignity fundamentally non-normative and non-teleological, while still reserving for it a specific meaning and set of applications.

In offering this definition I build on that proposed by Charles Rubin (2008), who defines dignity as ‘giving people what they are due’. This is a useful starting point, but there are three problems with his definition. The first is that it is insufficiently historicised. What a person is due fluctuates according to their conditions. It is influenced by their treatment by other groups and by the state, by the examples available to them, and by a host of other complex factors. As such, what matters is not ‘what they are due’ in any timeless or objective sense, but rather what they *feel* they are due according to the structures they inhabit. The second is that it does not lend much thought to the different kinds of agent that might be involved in this relation. I want to stress that dues can be owed by a wide variety of agents, ranging from individuals, to institutions, to individuals representing institutions: state bodies, or employers. Dues might be owed to us by another person, or they might be what we owe to ourselves. And the third is that it focuses exclusively on material dues. Yet dues can be material or immaterial, and expressed in both abstract and concrete ways. The respect of a peer or a stake in a state welfare system which is understood to indicate respect for one’s status as a citizen might both be examples of dues; being denied the right to vote, or being passed over for a job in favour of a less suitable candidate, might both be interpreted as deprivation of dues, and thus as affronts to dignity. Dignity reveals a uniquely human blessing: the sense that we deserve more than we have and that we might, in the future, hope to have what we deserve.

As stated, this means conceiving of dignity as a relation between different agents: a dues-claimer and a dues-respecter (or non-respecter). Dignity is a relation insofar as it only exists in the immediate interaction between two people (or between a person and their own self-perception) rather than as a status that persists throughout time. Many others have already recognised dignity as a relation, not an innate quality or status (Feinberg 1970; Darwall 2006; Bird 2013; Barak 2015; Debes 2017; Goodhart 2018). I want to add to these accounts the observation that a dignity existing *between* agents, rather than as a quality that is

intrinsic and internal to them or as a status that pertains to them, has an innately political character. If dignity consists in that which we feel we are due, then it commits us to make demands of others regarding those dues. That fact then commits them to assent to, dissent from, or seek to moderate my demand, pitching us into a negotiation. It follows that there will often be disputes over what people are due from their peers, their employers, from government and civil society, which must be negotiated and resolved between them. Thus dignity's specific content is never fixed, never settled, but always subject to contestation between different groups making claims for particular dues. And because different people and groups will articulate their sense of their own dues differently, they will vest dignity with different content – content that is nonetheless always orientated around the central issue of dues.

Without doubt the most ambitious reconceptualization of dignity as a relational concept in is that put forward by Bird (2021). Bird proposes a complete overhaul of the “traditional” accounts of dignity. In place of an equal, unconditional, and innate moral quality, he proposes a vulnerable, performative concept that is produced by and within relations between people, and as a result need not pertain to people equally. What remains to be added to this account? As Ariel Zylberman (2023) points out, Bird does not supply his theory with a normative force: once dignity has been desacralized in the way he suggests, she argues, we no longer have any grounds for asserting it against ill moral treatment. My response to this problem is that the normative component of dignity always came from the outside, even in the traditional accounts. Conceiving of dignity claims as acts of political will allow us to avoid this problem.

A number of scholars working in the field of political science have already noted the importance of dignity in forms of political negotiation. To wit, Nora El Qadim (2018) observes that the demand for dignity motivates Moroccan negotiators in discussions on visas with European officials; Salvador Regilme (2019), that dignity acts as an “emancipatory rallying

cry” for better moral treatment; Donna Hicks (2021 [2011]), that peace cannot be negotiated without establishing mutual respect for the dignity of each side. We already understand that honouring people’s dignity is vital for a healthy politics; I hope my contribution here will go some way to explaining why.

A dignity without contradictions

We have outlined what a political idea of dignity means and entails. Now we have to put it to the test. The first of the three criteria for a more viable dignity that I laid out in the introduction was its conceptual integrity. Is a political dignity more sound than other forms of dignity?

One major advantage of this understanding of dignity is that it clears the quagmire of essentialism that bogged down both of the traditional schools of thought on dignity. With a political conception of dignity, it is no longer necessary to appeal either to any specific aspect of humanity, or to some transcendental authority, in order to assert that one has dignity. While a person *might* claim that they have dues that ought to be respected on grounds of something essentially human, they can just as easily make such claims on another basis entirely. They can assert a dignity that is universal among human beings, or one that pertains to a particular social group; indeed, they can do both without contradiction, since both claims can be taken to refer to different sets of dues. A political dignity can be at once universal and particular without ever succumbing to essentialism.

Nonetheless, it is important to ensure that a political understanding of dignity does not escape the contradictions plaguing the legal and moral conceptions, only to blunder into new contradictions all of its own. As such, I need to address some of the potential objections to a dignity understood as ‘our sense of what we are due’.

It is worth beginning with Adam Etinson's (2020) objection to all of what he calls the "Gateway theories" of dignity: those in which dignity is what entitles humans to certain "moral observances" from others. Etinson argues that if dignity consists in the honouring of these "moral observances" then minor crimes like bike theft and vandalism would have to be understood as attacks on human dignity, insofar as they involve treatment that is less than a person should be due. Yet, he points out, we would find it absurd to claim that these infractions offend our human dignity. This would indeed be incongruous, but I think it would be fair to suggest that a person who suffers such minor offences might have a sense of humiliation that someone has been able to inflict harm on them with apparent impunity, and a sense of satisfaction if the perpetrator is brought to justice, this representing what they feel they are due as a result. We can thus accommodate Etinson's objection with a broader relational conception of dignity that ranges beyond the traditional lofty territory of 'human dignity' to include *feelings* of dignity and humiliation in everyday life. Vandalism or theft then *can* be understood as affronts to our dignity, in a way that might have important political and social consequences (for example, if this sense of affronted dignity leads people to endorse a more authoritarian "law and order" candidate in the next set of elections).

Alternatively, the idea of rendering dignity a purely subjective phenomenon might seem to contradict our sense that a person can be objectively in a state of indignity even without personal consciousness of the indignity that they are in. As William Ian Miller (1995) points out, the process of inflicting *indignity* upon a person requires an understanding of how this is objectively achieved, without having access to the subjective experience that would verify this understanding. Dignity can, indeed, be physically inscribed in bodies. John Berger (2009) notes one example of this: formal suits were traditionally made for the slender, idle bodies of aristocrats. When, in the early twentieth century, they became an obligatory uniform for all classes, they could never be made to sit easily on the bulky body of a peasant, an incongruity exacerbated the clumsiness, the lack of grace, that was ascribed to peasants. It seems, then, that some dignity is inescapably conditioned by our social

standing. Insofar as dignity rests on common social codes, it might appear impossible to understand how it works in practice without recognising its objective character. However, the fact that our judgement of whether or not a person is getting what they are due is conditioned by a set of common standards on which we have collectively agreed is by no means incompatible with the assertion that dignity is dependent on that judgement: it is simply to say that our subjectivity is itself already conditioned. As such, a political conception of dignity, while based on subjective judgement, is well capable of incorporating the extra-subjective dimension of dignity.

As this implies, we make dignity claims within contexts that are already shaped by systems beyond our immediate control. We live at a moment of cognitive dissonance, insofar as rights within society are formally equal, yet we are alive to the reality that is difference of treatment and inequality of opportunities. The fact of my existing in a capitalist economy is what produces the social, not natural, fact of my being employed and under the supervision of my boss, and this unnatural hierarchy necessarily introduces a differentiation between any feelings of disrespect that I might feel and those that my boss feels. Our living in a racialised environment shapes the expectations that we have of each other as racialised subjects. The dignity that I propose is a means of navigating and perhaps resolving this dissonance.

One might then object that resting dignity entirely on a subjective assessment leaves us with no definite means of determining whether or not a person has dignity. But this chimes with our experience. A person can be utterly humiliated in the eyes of others while, in their own view, preserving their dignity. The judgement that another person is not receiving their dues requires a subjective estimate, which may or may not match their own, of what that person is due. It is still the individual assessment, whether of subject or observer, that matters. The contradiction here is not semantic, but hermeneutic. If we want agreement on whether or not a person has dignity, in the sense that their dues have been rendered to them, then we have to forge that agreement with others through negotiation.

In this way, the process of determining what one is due also comes to be conditioned *by* social agreements regarding dignity, which helps to answer another possible objection: that once we have recognised this game, we might attach our dignity to the most outlandish dues claims, using our dignity to leverage demands for things that no reasonable person would give us. To answer this we can begin by imagining a competent but self-effacing worker who is passed over for a promotion. Others will feel her dignity has been hurt by this experience, but she might think the decision really does represent what she is due, meaning that in her own mind her dignity remains intact. If she continues to insist that she just did not deserve the promotion because it was beyond her capacities, others might start to find this a little undignified, because they will have the sense that she is not giving herself what she is due, even if she is perfectly sincere in her self-appraisal. Alternatively, if she really had felt hopeful about getting the promotion and thus interprets the snub as a comment on her capacities as a worker, she might then feel it was undignified to get her hopes up, that she was overestimating her capacities and thus making an unwarranted, overambitious claim to dues. Now imagine the colleague who did receive the promotion, despite being regarded by everyone else in the office as a lesser candidate, felt very confident from the start that he was going to get it. He feels that his dignity has been honoured by the fact that he was given the promotion he was due, but everyone else will likely think that his overconfidence beforehand and his self-satisfaction after the fact represent an overestimate of his own worth, which is undignified. Thus a person can end up hurting their own dignity, in their own eyes or in the eyes of others, by making what they or other people decide is a poor assessment of what they are due. This dynamic within dignity helps to limit what claims we can make on the basis of our dignity.

Related is the opposite risk: that an oppressive force could reduce people's sense of self-worth to the point where they believe they are due next to nothing. In such a situation, it seems, the oppressor could argue that they are honouring the dignity of the oppressed on

their own terms. But as we have established, observers are not bound to agree with us about the state of our own dignity. As such, a third party in the above situation would be at liberty to persuade the oppressed person that they are owed much more than they have been given by their oppressor: indeed, this has long been a preoccupation of emancipatory political movements, which have recognised that their first task (under various rubrics, from the Marxist class for-itself, to Black power, to 'consciousness-raising' by the feminist movement) is that of persuading the oppressed to make demands for better treatment. As Frantz Fanon (2002) – a theorist very much alive to abuses of 'dignity' – observed of a good social organisation, "The branch meeting and the committee meeting are liturgical acts. They are privileged occasions given to a human being to listen and to speak. At each meeting, the brain increases its means of participation and the eye discovers a landscape more and more in keeping with human dignity." The key fact here is that we cannot expect a term like 'dignity' to save us the hard political work of building the basis for justice and egalitarianism. Without this work behind it, the term will always seem empty and hollow to those who feel themselves to lack dignity. Michael Rosen describes the treatment of others and ourselves with dignity as a duty that we owe on account of our humanity (2013, 140). I agree – but for this to be true we must first be persuaded that we owe it.

An alternative objection might be that this kind of dignity could be self-nullifying. In other words, if we assume that when a person makes an appeal to dignity, they are really saying that they are entitled to something that they do not currently have, we should just ignore dignity entirely and get down to negotiating over what it is that they want. But dignity is not just an instrument for initiating a negotiation over dues: it also provides a barometer for the acceptability of those negotiations. Each party will want an outcome that they feel honours their dignity – their sense of what they are due. As such, it is only 'when dignity is satisfied' that we will be able to say the negotiation has come to a mutually acceptable, and thus sustainable, conclusion. If one party comes away feeling that they still have not been afforded their dignity, or worse actually humiliated, by the negotiations, then the settlement

likely will not stand. Thus while dignity does fulfil the function of triggering a negotiation over dues, it also fulfils a vital function in regulating the terms of that negotiation and in guaranteeing its longevity. It does not cease to be relevant once negotiations have begun, nor even when they have finished, for people's sense of what they are due can always change.

Finally, a critic might respond that the function carried out by this form of dignity can already be accounted for by other, related concepts. Above all, in the sense that it is linked with what we deserve, dignity in my definition might seem to collapse into the concept of distributive justice, or desert. Indeed, the term 'justice' is often used by mass movements to vindicate similar claims to those otherwise upheld by 'dignity'. But the two concepts have slightly different uses for which it is worth reserving them. 'Justice' still implies a resort to an external, transcendental or even objective judgement of right and wrong that is independent of the subjective judgement of the participants in the situation, whereas dignity is grounded strictly in their subjective experience. This is not to say subjectivity is unimportant to justice: explaining our *sense* of justice is of course an important philosophical task. But this sense of justice necessarily has reference to an ideal that is independent of our subjectivity. To give one prominent example, when John Rawls applies himself to this question, he seeks to explain our sense of justice in terms of 'what justice requires' (Rawls, 1963). This phrasing suggests that we understand justice as an outside force that makes demands on us; if we feel these demands internally, it is not because they are endogenous but because we have internalised them. Another way of expressing this is through the observation that two people cannot have both conflicting and justified senses of injustice. One must be in the right and the other in the wrong. In contrast, it is possible for two people to come to very different opinions about whether they are or are not dignified without one of these being definitively correct.

Additionally, dignity has a reflexive capacity that is less natural to the concept of justice. If we fall short of our own standards of behaviour in a social situation, we can berate ourselves for having been undignified, but we will not feel that we have acted unjustly. It is possible to assert that we have been unjust to ourselves, but this implies a different situation in which the standards we have set for ourselves turn out to be too high. As such, it does seem that there is enough space between 'dignity' and 'justice' to allow us to treat the two concepts as separate.

Political dignity and ordinary language

The second test was that this new conceptualisation of dignity should match the use of the term 'dignity' in ordinary language so that it can effectively carry out an analytical function, i.e. that of explaining what people mean when they use the term 'dignity'. Elizabeth Anderson (2014) has already described the advantages of a genealogical approach to defining dignity (see also Beitz 2013). This is doubly important for me because I asserted above that the idea of dignity as based on a sense of what we are due itself arises from ordinary language, insofar as it is a definition that seeks to incorporate all the ways in which dignity is actually used, rather than an engineered definition derived from theoretical preconceptions.

This presents a serious challenge to the existing accounts of dignity, which rarely match up with the historical and present reality of the use of the term 'dignity'. Firstly, it is an inconvenient fact that even those thinkers who *have* endorsed a vision of egalitarian human dignity have consistently treated some groups of people as if they had a greater moral worth than others – most notably the man generally taken to be its originator, Immanuel Kant. Charles Mills (2017) even suggests that this hypocrisy is baked into the concept of dignity that we have inherited. Such questions undermine the egalitarian and universalist aspirations that dignity theorists working in moral philosophy vest in the concept. They call into question the idea that a truly egalitarian concept of dignity has ever really existed.

Theorists of egalitarian dignity have, at least implicitly, acknowledged the difficulty of applying their conceptions of dignity to the real world by treating dignity as something that has to be reengineered before it can be used (e.g. Kamir 2020). We can demonstrate the gap between theories of egalitarian dignity and the actual use of the term dignity in ordinary language with a familiar concept like 'dignity at work'. The demand for dignity at work is clearly not the demand to be given equal moral treatment as a human being. It would be too much of a stretch to say that a boss who is rude or unappreciative is offending our humanity. A legal conception of dignity as a status that guarantees a set of rights is also inadequate to account for 'dignity at work', because this kind of dignity is expressly the demand for something that goes beyond the rights laid out in our work contract, or any other codified set of rights. Neither version of dignity can provide a useful account of what it means to have dignity at work, or why we should have it. And since egalitarian dignity does not, in general, correspond closely to real uses of the term dignity, we cannot sidestep the conceptual confusion of egalitarian dignity by ascribing to it an analytical function.

Can a political conception of dignity do a better job? If my boss is rude to me, then even if I cannot honestly say that my humanity has been offended, nor that it is a violation of my rights, I can still argue that as a worker I am due a certain level of respect that is being denied to me. This claim has to be grounded in my own sense of what I am owed; I cannot justify it through recourse to some external and eternal standard of justice. It is of course possible for me to use such a standard to buttress my case: for example, I might band together with my fellow workers to create a code of conduct for managers to abide by. But this operates by pooling our senses of what we are due and codifying them to strengthen our claim to dignity, and it works only insofar as our united wills would grant the document a legitimate right to be heard. Our dignity claim would still be grounded in no more than our own assertion that this is what we are due.

It might otherwise be countered that we frequently make claims for dues without framing them in terms of dignity. If we want a pay raise from our boss, we are unlikely to justify our claim to it by arguing that our dignity depends on, say, an extra £700 a year. In this sense my definition might not seem to cleave so closely to ordinary language. But in fact, this only becomes truly a claim for *dues* when we believe that we *deserve* that extra £700 a year. And in these circumstances, even if we would not say that our dignity depends on the raise, we are likely to feel humiliated if our boss turns us down, because it suggests that they do not agree that we are worthy of it. This would seem to imply that dignity was always at stake in this case, whether or not we phrased it in those terms.

Of course, this does not mean to say that all dues claims are necessarily related to dignity. Say my boss tells me that I am lazy and shiftless and that I owe the company a higher standard of work. As much as this implies I am not giving the company what he feels it is due, it would not be convincing to say that I am offending the dignity of the company. This presents no problem: my argument is that dignity is always about dues, not that all dues are about dignity. Note, however, that if I feel I am working perfectly hard and my boss should get off my back, I am likely to feel he has wounded my dignity by scolding me like this, and if I act on this sense of humiliation by telling him exactly what I think of his management style, he might well also end up feeling that his dignity has been injured, because as his employee I owe him more deference. This is the sense in which dignity can be asymmetrical – each side can feel they are being denied what is due to them by the other – and not necessarily egalitarian – my boss can determine that he is entitled to something from me, like a certain degree of fawning, that he would not think he owes to me in turn. Indeed, if I am that sort of employee, I might well also think that he is non-reciprocally owed sycophantic treatment from me. In each case, what matters is each person's sense of what they and the other person is due, which might vary not only from individual to individual, but in the same individual across time (if, say, after years of passive obedience, one day I finally blow my top and make my opinions known to my boss).

I have been writing in terms of “respecting” what one is due. This might not seem to accord with ordinary language: surely we simply “give” or “do not give” what a person is due, and we respect or do not respect the person in question? But I think there is another category that is equally important to our moral psychology. Say my boss turns down my request for a pay raise, not because I am lazy and shiftless, but because the organisation is going through hard times and they truly cannot afford it, and shows me data proving this conclusively. I will be more mollified by his recognition that I am worthy of the reward, even if it is currently impossible for him to give it to me, than I would be by a simple “no”, and this sense that he is respecting what I am due even if he does not give it to me might be the difference between my taking and not taking industrial action. Alternatively, if I am commiserating with a colleague after that meeting and she agrees that I did deserve the raise, I might be consoled by this third-party respect for a due that she is unable to give me, with the result that my sense of grievance is lessened (although it might equally harden my resolve to go and get what I am due). Here we understand that respecting what we feel we are due is a proxy for respecting us, insofar as we base our sense of what we are due on a sense of what we are worth. The language of “respect for” what we are due is thus more expansive than mere “giving”, and since it is not actually counter-intuitive I think making this slight divergence from ordinary language is worthwhile.

Even in academic circles, in spite of the tendency to talk about dignity as if it were a quality or status, we mostly *use* dignity in a way that defies its conceptualisation as innate and unconditional. Some of the conceptual confusion of which critics of dignity have complained can be attributed to the fact that so many of the ways in which we think about dignity assume that it is neither inviolable nor personal. For example, the observation that one individual has a more ‘dignified’ bearing than another, or the idea that a person has had their dignity stripped from them by torture or ill treatment, imply that dignity is something

conditional, that has to be recognised in one person by another. This fact is obscured when we try to conceive of it as something that is innate and inviolable.

Indeed, one of the stranger aspects of modern debates on dignity is that they often employ essentially political content, and yet rarely acknowledge its political character. We can see this in Jürgen Habermas's (2010) contribution to the debate on dignity, which attempts an ambitious fusion of the ethical and legal approaches. In his view, human rights have always had a moral charge, which disappeared only through the disintegration of natural jurisprudence into two distinct disciplines, ethics and law. He suggests that egalitarian and universalist dignity acts as a dynamic moral substance that re-synthesises these two disciplines. Habermas not only denies that his dignity is political, but goes as far as to suggest that dignity cannot be political. Yet his understanding of the concept is infused with political contestation. He recognises that dignity is essentially the subject of political negotiation, noting that dignity 'performs the function of a seismograph that registers what is constitutive for a democratic legal order, namely, just those rights that the citizens of a political community must grant themselves if they are to be able to respect one another as members of a voluntary association of free and equal persons.' And he acknowledges that the establishing of human rights based on dignity 'has never been possible without social movements and political struggles'. Insofar as his dignity is something negotiated between different parties, and something that underpins demands for a certain kind of treatment, it strongly resembles the version of dignity that I am proposing here. Even the versions of dignity used by theorists working in the moral and legal traditions, then, have a more properly political character. We are already thinking about dignity primarily in political terms: we need only recognise it.

It seems, then, as if a political conception of dignity does match the use of dignity in ordinary language. This also makes it more analytically useful than other understandings of the concept. Throughout this essay we have seen cases of important movements in recent

years making dignity central to their political language. A political conception of dignity can help us to understand what they really meant in using dignity in this way.

For example, what did it mean when protesters in Egypt and Syria referred to their movements as “revolutions of dignity”? In their use of this term they invoked an important dynamic within the relationship between state and citizen. In the modern day, states are at least theoretically committed to maintaining our dignity. Isabelle Marin (1991) notes that legal codes usually enshrine a right to dignity in place of a right to life, for while there are situations in which we might, however reluctantly, consider the state’s taking of life to be legitimate, the state can never be allowed to strip a person of their dignity. In the same way that, as Giorgio Agamben (1998) informs us, the sovereignty of the modern state consists not merely in the capacity to inflict death, but in the management of vital processes for the sake of the prolongation of ‘bare life’, we not only expect the modern western state to refrain from injuring our dignity, but demand that it actively uphold dignity. The forms that this dignity takes depend on the dues that citizens feel are theirs: they might believe that their dignity is upheld by, for example, the provision of a robust welfare state that affords every citizen a dignified state of being, by maintaining considerable space for the exercise of essential rights, or by facilitating the greatest possible political participation (Mahoney Smith 2017; Bryan et al. 2011). In sum, the modern state’s commitment to uphold human dignity effectively requires it to engage with the demands made by its citizens to have what they feel is due to them honoured.

Yet the state also plays a vital role in shaping our sense of our dignity, insofar as it produces impressions of what we are due as individuals and as communities. Thus, if citizens are afforded certain social and political rights and entitlements, they will grow to consider themselves worthy of them, and their political actions and identity will change accordingly. As Suzanne Mettler (2005) puts it: ‘Through the bestowal of social rights, citizens may become more fully incorporated as members of the political community. The

extension of social provision may not only ensure them some modicum of wellbeing but also convey to them a sense of dignity and value as citizens.' In post-war France, this was recognised in the form of a short-lived offence known as *l'indignité nationale*, under which those who had been complicit in the country's subjugation under the Nazis were stripped of a number of legal rights (Simonin 2008). The loss of these entitlements from the state was apparently understood as both a proxy for and a means of stripping them of their dignity. Punishment can, equally, be perceived as a way of honouring dignity: as Jacques Derrida (2012) observes, the death penalty was historically understood in European societies as a formal recognition of the capacity to stake one's own life in the law, felt to be unique to human beings and a function of their dignity. Whatever its means of doing so, the state is instrumental in constructing a person's understanding of their own dignity, which gives them the grounds for assessing whether or not what they feel is due to them is being provided. Thus the state both shapes our sense of dignity, of what we are due in our own minds, and is bound to satisfy the demands we make for dues under the rubric of dignity.

Returning to our example, we can now see that the Arab Spring's use of the language of dignity referred to both sides of this relation: it consisted in, firstly, an observation that their states were setting too low a standard of what they were due as citizens, and secondly, a demand to have their own, superior dues claims honoured. In other words, when Egyptian revolutionaries chanted 'bread, dignity, freedom' in 2011, they meant that the state was depriving them of their dignity by failing to serve their material interests and by refusing to allow them a say in both their own personal futures (owing to incompetence, nepotism and corruption) and the future of the state (Shenker 2017). A conception of dignity as a political and dues-based phenomenon can bring us such useful insights into the role of dignity in political language.

A dignity both political and egalitarian

The final test for this conception of dignity is its power to support the principle of equal moral treatment. When I state that a political conception of dignity will be better able to vindicate moral equality, this is not because that principle is intrinsic to dignity; indeed, my point is precisely that no principle can be taken to be intrinsic to dignity. It might make it seem as if I am importing an unrelated concept without any justification. But my contention is that moral equality is *always* exogenous to dignity. Asserting it as an aspect of dignified treatment, whether this is done by a legal, moral or political philosopher, is always an act of political will. I am simply proposing that we recognise this as a fact. At the same time, I am intervening in an existing debate. Since most theorists of dignity want to use it to vindicate moral equality, and since I likewise believe this is an essential principle to uphold, I am addressing myself principally in this paper to those who see dignity as inextricably bound up with moral equality. I hope to reassure such people that my understanding of dignity does not mean abandoning this commitment, not to assert as an uncontroversial fact the notion that moral equality is integral to dignity. By the same token, arguments that dignity is unrelated to equality – for example, a claim our true aim should be to uphold sufficient rather than perfectly equal dignity – can be asserted with perfect validity using my understanding of dignity.

After all that has been said, this might seem tougher than the other two tests. We began by removing any external point of reference that could be used to vest dignity with predefined content. This prevents us from asserting the insoluble link between dignity and moral equality that characterised both of the other forms of dignity. Indeed, thinking of dignity as conceptually overcharged and initially indeterminate does of course require us to accept the legitimacy of the use of ‘dignity’ to furnish non-egalitarian arguments by social groups that feel their dignity entitle them to greater dues than others in society: say, white supremacists who believe more is due to them in terms of political and economic rewards

than to other ethnic groups. If they were to assert that their dignity as white people depends on this, we would no longer be able to declare this an abuse of the term 'dignity'. My redefinition could, then, seem to weaken dignity's capacity to serve arguments in favour of equal moral treatment.

But while a political understanding of dignity does force us to accept the validity of reactionary uses of the term, it does not force us to see their actual claims to dues as valid. Redefining dignity politically just means that we have to make the political case for egalitarianism against anti-egalitarians who want to claim special dues for specific social groups, and make sure that triumph in this argument. This has the added advantage of negating one of the more potent rhetorical weapons deployed by modern anti-egalitarians, which is the assertion that the political and legal systems are rigged against them (Ege and Springer 2023). The idea that key terms in our political discourse, like 'dignity', have a predefined egalitarian and liberal definition helps to fuel the argument that the political order is intrinsically hostile to them, which allows them to channel the rage of their supporters into damaging anti-political, generally conspiracist, ideas and tactics. Putting terms like dignity at stake in the business of politics can draw these energies back into the political sphere.

Moreover, there is good reason to think a dues-based understanding of dignity will not be captured by reactionary forces, nor fracture into sectional interests. We have seen that dignity provides a framework for people to make demands for particular dues, but it also shapes what people expect from other agents. When people feel their receipts are less than their dues, they use the term 'dignity' to articulate this fact and claim what they feel is due to them against whichever other agent is considered liable for providing it. Since asserting that someone deserves something on account of their dignity is also to make a normative political claim that they and others like them have a prior and permanent entitlement to these dues, it also creates grounds for others to make the same demands, which serves as a constant nudge towards universalism.

In fact, it could be argued that putting dignity back into political play actually puts us on a better footing to conceptualise a truly emancipatory form of dignity that can be used to make demands on and against oppressive systems and states, because it permits us to define our own sense of what is due to us as dignified beings, rather than relying on a predetermined, often state-backed definition of what we are due. It brings us back to what Debes (2009, 55-6) suggests, drawing on Alexander Hamilton, could be a key power of an ambiguous dignity: we might reserve more power for individuals by not specifying what they are entitled to on grounds of their dignity. But at the same time we have addressed Debes's fear that a concept consisting in ambiguity would be too weak to fight off reactionary, hierarchical, autocratic or simply provocative assaults on dignity with the assurance that for as long as we retain the political will to combat and defeat these assaults, dignity will stand. And a dignity that has been forged by democratic consensus should be stronger than one that is simply asserted as a moral or legal fact.

Certainly, recent history suggests that a political dignity is most likely to keep serving egalitarian and universalist aims. To return one final time to the example of the Arab Spring: the term 'dignity' there served an important unifying role, reminding participants in the revolutions of what was being denied to them all as citizens of equal standing, and rallying them behind a common and inclusive vision of the future. Actual uses of dignity in recent years suggest that its ability to rally people around egalitarian projects will be undiminished whether or not we understand it as intrinsically egalitarian.

Conclusion

Existing approaches to the concept of dignity have tied themselves in knots, to the point where some theorists would prefer to do away with it entirely. The reality is that they were doomed from the start by their insistence on giving dignity a definite and non-negotiable egalitarian and universal character that is logically self-contradictory, that is at odds with the

history of the concept, and that has obscured the concept's dynamic relationality. A dignity that is understood politically is more conceptually sound, because it is not shackled to an *a priori* commitment to universalism that colours it with an unsavoury essentialism. It is more analytically rigorous, because it can better explain what role dignity actually plays in our language. And it is better able to rally people behind moral egalitarianism, because it returns this cause to the political sphere and allows people to determine for themselves what kind of treatment is congruent with their dignity.

Stripping out its commitment to unconditional moral equality does not mean rejecting an egalitarian or emancipatory ideal of dignity. It simply means understanding this ideal as a product of strategic political reasoning, and not of dignity's own internal logic. Indeed, it gives us the opportunity to construct a more genuine, and hopefully more lasting, universalism from the ground up. Those of us who believe in universal rights and equal moral treatment can and should still make use of dignity; we simply should not expect it to make our arguments for us.

Acknowledgements: My thanks to Sylvana Tomaselli, who kindly provided comments on the first drafts of this paper and helped to formulate many of its key ideas. I am also grateful to Carl Pierer and all of the members of the PT/HPT Writing Workshop at the University of Cambridge for their helpful feedback on an earlier of this paper, and to Rachel McVeigh for her close and considered reading of successive drafts. Finally, I am indebted to the two reviewers at Political Research Exchange for a close and generous engagement with the first submission of this paper; their comments have improved it immeasurably.

Declaration of interest: no interest to be declared.

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