

The concept of dignity in Edmund Burke's writings on the French Revolution

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Abstract: This paper argues that the concept of dignity played an important role in the political thought of Edmund Burke. It seeks to show that, in contrast with the egalitarian and individual version of dignity associated with Immanuel Kant, Burke devised a conception of dignity that rested on reverence, grandeur and formality, to be manifested through institutions, customs, and social relations.

Burkean dignity was thus closely linked with the ancient constitution. In his thought, dignity played an essential role in maintaining social stability and ensuring wise governance. This conviction informed Burke's opposition to the French Revolution, which he feared would destroy the conditions necessary for dignity to thrive. Unpicking Burke's understanding of dignity thus gives us new insights into the intricacies of his political thought and another perspective on his opposition to the French Revolution.

Acknowledgements: Throughout the writing process this article has benefited from the suggestions of Sylvana Tomaselli. I am grateful to Rachel McVeigh for her detailed comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers, whose thoughtful and generous remarks gave this paper its final shape.

1. Introduction

Someone looking to produce a genealogy of the concept of dignity is unlikely to search first in the works of Edmund Burke. ‘Dignity’ has come, since roughly his era, to be most closely associated with exactly the kind of egalitarian abstraction that he famously loathed. Yet the word ‘dignity’ had a peculiar pull for Burke. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* alone, he used it twenty-nine times, more than twice as many as he did ‘prescription’ and four times as many as ‘custom’. This suggests that uncovering Burke’s understanding of dignity might offer us valuable insights into his political philosophy.

This paper argues that throughout his career, Burke formulated a unique conception of dignity, and applied it to vindicate his opinions on the French Revolution between 1790 and 1796. To demonstrate this, I will first excavate this theory of dignity from his writings before and during the Revolution, arguing that Burke associated dignity closely with reverence, power, and age. Such a dignity was more naturally embodied in practices, institutions, and relationships than in individuals, to whom, Burke thought, it accrued only through the mediation of social hierarchy. Maintaining this dignity was vital for social stability and good governance, and as such it played a key role in Burke’s opposition to the French Revolution and in his defence of prescription, a role that I will indicate throughout this paper.

Despite its prominence in his writings, Burke’s thinking on dignity has attracted surprisingly little attention from scholars. It is omitted entirely from William F. Byrne’s 2021 survey of key Burkean concepts, *Edmund Burke for Our Time*.¹ Richard Bourke, in his monumental study of Burke’s life and thought *Empire and Revolution* (2015), does much to convey dignity’s importance in buttressing Burke’s thought, but does not seek to explicate

¹ Byrne, *Burke for Our Time*.

what he really meant by the word.² The same is true of two recent biographies of Burke, by Jesse Norman (2013) and David Bromwich (2014), which both recognise the weight that their subject laid on the term ‘dignity’, but without inquiring into its role in his thought.³ Bromwich even briefly suggests that Burke endorsed a universalist concept of dignity, but does not elaborate on this idea.⁴

In fact, to find a detailed and specific analysis of the meaning of the term ‘dignity’ in Burke, it is necessary to go back a 1987 article by Michael J. Meyer on Kantian dignity, which uses Burke as a foil. Meyer argues that Burke only used ‘dignity’ to refer to a rank in an established hierarchy. As such, in Meyer’s reading, Burke thought it impossible for common people to have dignity, since they had no social rank; the best they could hope for was what Meyer calls “dignity by proxy”, referring to a kind of dignity reflected from the wealth and ostentation of the upper orders.⁵ Meyer’s interpretation is thoughtful and incisive, but this paper will seek to show that Burke’s use of dignity was more nuanced than he allows. Burke was not the slavish devotee of hierarchy that Meyer presents him as, and accordingly he understood dignity as something more transcendental than mere social rank. For him it was not really something that pertained to human beings at all, but something embodied in the social fabric; thus, while Meyer is correct that he did not credit the lower orders with dignity, we should recognize that he did not see the dignity of the upper orders as something integral to them, but rather as something that had settled quite contingently on their shoulders.

² Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*.

³ Norman, *Edmund Burke*; Bromwich, *Intellectual Life*, especially 180, 212-3, 222, 240, 260.

⁴ Bromwich, *Intellectual Life*, 53.

⁵ Meyer, “Kant’s Concept”, 321-3.

Unearthing Burke's conception of dignity also serves a broader purpose at a time when dignity itself is coming under growing scrutiny. The longstanding consensus that all human beings enjoy a universal, unconditional quality called dignity, that functions as a grounding of the principle of moral equality, has come under attack in recent years. Critics have lined up to argue that the concept of dignity is hopelessly conceptually confused, and thus unusable as an ethical principle.⁶ Even defenders of the term admit that it is a fiercely contested concept that can be used to vindicate quite different – even directly contradictory – arguments.⁷ Yet it has proved impossible to abandon the concept of dignity: it has become too deeply entrenched in our thinking on the ethics of interpersonal relations. As Isabelle Marin argues, recognition of the dignity we share with others is the means by which we carry out our most fundamental ethical obligation, that is, acknowledging the self-sufficient subjectivity of other people.⁸

All of this has served to stimulate new interest in studying the historical development of the concept of dignity, to understand its applications and its limitations. This process has, likewise, unsettled established ideas. Histories of dignity once instinctively took as their starting point Immanuel Kant, widely regarded as the pioneer of an ethical concept of dignity as an alienable, inviolable quality that all human beings have *qua* humans, that entitles them to be treated as ends and not used as means.⁹ Yet historians of Kant have now largely come to reject the idea that he invented this form of dignity, or indeed any new version of the concept. For Oliver Sensen, Kant's concept of dignity was neither a quality innate to the human being, nor truly universal and inalienable, while Rachel Bayefsky contends that there is no stark

⁶ See especially Sangiovanni, *Humanity without Dignity*, *passim*; Mattson and Clark, "Human dignity", 303-19; Macklin, "Dignity is a Useless Concept", 1419-20"

⁷ See for example Waldron, "Foundation of Human Rights", 6-8; Rosen, *Dignity*, 6-10.

⁸ Marin, "La dignité humaine", 100-1.

⁹ See for example Debes, "Human Dignity, 207; Donnelly, "Human Dignity", 20-1; Taylor, "Politics of Recognition", 41. See also Bayefsky's summary of recent Kant scholarship in "Kant's Perspective", 810-12.

difference between Kant's idea of dignity and the older, hierarchical conception of dignity associated with honour.¹⁰

This work has opened space for historians to begin seeking alternative sources of the modern concept of dignity. Remy Debes, for example, argues that a proto-Kantian universalist and egalitarian dignity is already visible in the thought of Samuel Pufendorf and Denis Diderot.¹¹ Others have seized the opportunity to excavate forms of dignity that previously seemed to be eclipsed by the rise of its modern egalitarian, universalist, conception, and advance the possibility that these understandings of dignity played a more important role in defining the modern concept than has previously been recognised. For instance, Jeremy Waldron has suggested that the modern idea of dignity is really a universalized version of the premodern notion of dignity as a rank or status, while Michael Rosen has traced the role that Catholic doctrine played in reformulating dignity in the late 19th century.¹² This paper builds on both strands of this work by bringing to light an example of a hierarchical, inegalitarian and non-universalist conception of dignity that was theorised in the same decade as Kantian dignity.

The Burkean conception of dignity also makes other claims on our attention. In my view, his conviction that dignity was at stake in the politics of revolution places him among the first thinkers to articulate the idea that dignity is a political concern, paving the way for the notion, so important for us today, that one of the functions of the state should be to uphold the dignity of its citizens.¹³ Moreover, Burke's dignity has certain distinctive features that can

¹⁰ Sensen, "Dignity: Kant's Revolutionary Conception" especially 238, 240; Bayefsky, "Kant's Perspective", 811-2. See also Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 201.

¹¹ Debes, "Human Dignity before Kant", *passim*.

¹² Waldron, "Dignity and Rank", *passim*; Rosen, *Dignity*, 8-9, 19, 90-9.

¹³ Hence it has been enshrined as a fundamental and inviolable right in various pieces of international law: see for example Chapter 1, Title 1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

broaden our understanding of the concept more generally. His belief in a dignity embodied in the social fabric offers us the tools with which to see dignity as a phenomenon that arises from the cohabitation and coexistence of human beings, from our shared practices and a common cultural memory.

2. Dignity as a personal and institutional quality

The task of unearthing what Burke really *meant* by dignity is complicated by the fact that he did not use the word systematically, and indeed applied it in a wide variety of very different ways. Nonetheless, a survey of the works he published throughout his career, as well as his private correspondence, reveals that he did maintain some standard associations between dignity and other concepts which hint at functional, if porous, boundaries to the term. What we find is a consistent affinity between dignity and a particular cluster of qualities, namely power, awe, and grandeur. This idea, and a supplementary conviction that awe was closely associated with age, led him to regard dignity as a quality that more properly inhered in institutions than in individuals. In his understanding, dignity had to be manifested by a complex interplay between time-tested institutions and individual human beings. As such, dignity played a vital role in what Burke described as the “great primæval contract” linking past, present and future generations (*Reflections*, 261).

The link between dignity and awe is evident from Burke’s earliest writings. It makes its first and perhaps most explicit appearance in the distinction that Burke makes between Caesar and Cato in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). In an extended discussion, Burke describes the former figure as a beautiful character, whom we like and can relate to, and the latter an example of sublime dignity that we respect, admire and dread all at once. He then imposes this binary on all personal

characteristics: “The great virtues turn principally on dangers, punishments, and troubles [...] and are therefore not lovely, though highly venerable. The subordinate turned on reliefs, gratifications, and indulgences; and are therefore more lovely, though inferior in dignity” (*Writings and Speeches*, I, 271).¹⁴ Dignity, then, was connected with greatness, strength, and the overcoming of adversity: the characteristics that we respect and revere. In opposition to it were such attributes as “consistency, candour, and sincerity”, which were “qualities that gain private esteem, but never excite admiration” (*Correspondence*, 4, 153). As Iain Hampsher-Monk points out, this meant that for Burke, the sublime and the beautiful were gendered male and female respectively: respect pertained to men, affection to women.¹⁵ By the time he wrote *Reflections* in 1790, Burke was still committed to this connection between grandeur and dignity: he refers here to “a conscious dignity, a noble pride, a generous sense of glory and emulation” (205).

One characteristic that consistently produced a sense of awe and reverence was longevity: as he put it, again in *Reflections*, “We procure reverence to our civil institutions on the principle upon which nature teaches us to revere individual men; on account of their age” (185). This, too, was a conviction that Burke held throughout his career, evident as early as 1765, when he wrote that “Veneration of antiquity is congenial to the human mind” (*Writings and Speeches*, IX, 467). Indeed, this is likely the reason why Mary Wollstonecraft so frequently accused him of disrespecting Richard Price’s age in her riposte to Burke, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*: it allowed her to paint Burke as a hypocrite (*Rights of Men*, 7, 17, 58). This charge was not quite just, since Burke clearly did not think that age was

¹⁴ See Bourke’s extended discussion of this important dichotomy in *Empire and Revolution*, 143-4, 146. See also Dermot Ryan’s defence of using the categories of *Philosophical Enquiry* to understand Burke’s later works in “New Description of Empire”, 2.

¹⁵ Hampsher-Monk, “British radicalism”, 680-1. He is presumably basing his argument on Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 47-8.

sufficient to guarantee dignity. Those people who lacked its virtues in youth could not be sure of acquiring them with maturity. However, the passage of time did lend greater and greater dignity to those who, and that which, were already deserving of admiration. In sum, ‘dignity’ for Burke was a quality that pertained to longstanding, self-evident and self-conscious might, or an “old acknowledged greatness,” as he put it in 1777 (*Writings and Speeches*, III, 322).

This conviction that reverence was generative of dignity, and age generative of reverence, led him inexorably towards an understanding of dignity that was focused less on individuals than on institutions, which were inevitably both grander and more ancient than people ever could be. Of course, worthy individuals were certainly vested with more dignity as they aged, not least because, in getting older, they invariably also reached new heights of wisdom and virtue. Evidently, however, none could compete with laws, constitutional structures and social orders for venerability and for grandeur, and thus for dignity.

This seems to account for the observation, on which Meyer largely rests his account, that Burke frequently used the word ‘dignity’ to describe not a personal quality, but an official title or rank – in other words, to what we might call “formal dignities”. After all, titles and positions had a much longer and more illustrious history than any of their holders. But it is not the case that Burke only used the term ‘dignity’ to describe formal dignities. His understanding of dignity had a transcendental element: for Burke, formal dignities *produced* dignity in the persons who held them. The dignity of the crown, for example, is more properly understood, in his words, as the “dignity and rights of crowned Heads” (*Writings and Speeches*, VIII, 337).¹⁶

¹⁶ On the distinction between the person and the might of the sovereign, see Peter N. Miller, “Introduction” in Priestley, *Political Writings*. See also Richard Bourke’s discussion of the link between individuals and political institutions in “Enlightenment Sociability”, 648.

Burke made quite clear that there was nothing metaphysical about crowns or titles that gave them a unique power to bestow dignity. The dignity of a title was itself dependent on that title's place in a network of still grander and more venerable long-established laws, customs, and practices. As such, individuals had their dignity only on sufferance from the stability of the constitution, the social order, and shared customs, including, he was keen to emphasise, commercial practices: "our prosperity and dignity arose principally, if not solely, from two sources: our Constitution, and commerce" (*Writings and Speeches*, III, 59). This is why, in 1791, we find him complaining that Britain's allies against France "will consider nothing but the *physical* person of Louis, which, even in his present degraded and infamous state, they regard as of sufficient authority to give a complete sanction to the persecution and utter ruin of all his family" (*Writings and Speeches*, VIII, 377). Other European monarchies were failing to grasp the gravity of the situation in France. Louis XVI may have held on to his title, but once the crown had been stripped out of the ancient constitution that had guaranteed its powers, his status as monarch had lost its dignity. The dignity of the king was personal, but it was so by virtue of his person's being king, and most importantly of all, within a constitution that granted him dignity. As he put it, in bitter comparison with the Glorious Revolution: "With us we got rid of the man, and preserved the constituent parts of the state. There they get rid of the constituent parts of the state, and keep the man." (*Writings and Speeches*, IV, 292). Ultimately, then, for Burke, dignity was an essential product of the intricate network of time-honoured institutions that historians have recognised under the name "prescription".

Nonetheless, even if dignity was not rooted in the individual, nor was it *purely* vested in titles and old things. The person who bore the title was still necessary for the dignity

associated with it to manifest itself. Dignity, Burke wrote in *Reflections*, could not be abstract: it must be embodied “in persons; so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment” (240). We might venture a theological link to this idea: it echoes God’s appearance on the earth, not as an abstract power, but as a man. The masses could not truly respect and love an idea or an institution in the same way they did a person. And without those feelings, institutions and customs themselves could not function as intended: “These public affections [...] are required sometimes as supplements, sometimes as correctives, always as aids to law” (*Reflections*, 241). While customs and titles did produce dignity in people, their own dignity was dependent on the individuals who manifested it.

This relationship meant that the holder of an office could benefit from a dignity reflected by their office, regardless of their own qualities. The case he cites in favour of this claim in his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791) was that of Charles II, who had shown that a king could personally be “without any regard to the dignity of his crown” without very severe consequences for political stability, because the dignity of his person was inalienable on account of his title (*Writings and Speeches*, VIII, 322). On the other hand, it also meant that any loss of dignity to their status redounded on to the individual. This explains Eileen Hunt Botting’s observation that Burke understood the raid of Marie Antoinette’s bedroom as a symbolic rape of her person. In stripping her of her dignity as queen, the invading mob had also violated her dignity as a woman. Her formal dignity was inseparable from her personal dignity.¹⁷

The relation between the formal and personal dignity became still more complex in individual relationships. One of the more unexpected critiques of events in France in

¹⁷ Botting, *Family Feuds*, 116-7.

Reflections comprises a sustained attack on what Burke calls “a considerable revolution in their ideas of politeness”, in which he condemns the insult paid to fallen nobles in assuring them that their ruin is necessary for the public good. He concludes with a typically ironic comment:

I should have thought that the hangman of Paris, now that he is liberalized by the vote of the National Assembly, and is allowed his rank and arms in the Herald's College of the rights of men, would be too generous, too gallant a man, too full of the sense of his new dignity, to employ that cutting consolation to any of the persons whom the *leze nation* might bring under the administration of his *executive powers* (231-2).

It is a theme he returns to in the more famous passage on the women’s march on Versailles of October 1789, which he again refers to “as a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions”, mourning that “As things now stand, with everything respectable destroyed without us, and an attempt to destroy within us every principle of respect, one is almost forced to apologize for harboring the common feelings of men” (*Reflections*, 243). Clearly, then, for Burke there was a positive link between civility and dignity, one that the Revolution was putting in jeopardy; and a further link between these two categories and fellow feeling.

The key to understanding these two links can be found in a letter that Burke wrote to the Marchioness of Rockingham in 1779 to express his gratitude for her having recently invited him to join a society of which she was a patron. In the letter’s most telling phrase, Burke states that while such gratitude is “usually paid on other occasions by the spiritual and temporal Dignities”, these were “of less value” than the “humble prayers” that he would instead offer her (*Correspondence*, IV, 74). At first this championing of subjective sincerity over formal, rank-appropriate manners seems uncharacteristic of the author of *Reflections*.

But Burke never believed in minute attention to rank for its own sake. His argument is more subtle: it was *through* the mediation of rank that human beings arrived at more personal relationships. The letter to Rockingham does not indicate that Burke thought formal dignities of address less worthy than a more authentic personal respect; what is significant is that he first mentions the proper dignities that should be paid on such an occasion *in order to demonstrate* the pair's transcendence of them, which was then in effect to affirm the closeness of their relationship. In a word, the only way of demonstrating their personal intimacy was to contrast his authentic and individual gratitude with the usual dues of polite formality.

It followed that any attack on formal dignities would abolish a yardstick against which personal intimacy could be measured. If acquaintances could not pass through this time-honoured process, beginning with the most formal manners and, bit by bit, establishing the ease with each other that allowed them to dispense with these, a valuable means of creating friendships would be lost. The revolution in politeness that he decried was thus of deeper significance than first appears: the loss of manners mediated by formal dignities was a threat to the ties of affection that bound people together. And by sapping their fellow-feeling, the destruction of dignified manners risked undermining the very basis of society, whose continuation was the great duty of every generation. Burke leaves us in no doubt that a people who have no manners worthy of respect will soon lose any love for the society in which they live: "There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely" (*Reflections*, 241). While dignity was not, then, a personal quality for Burke, nor was it purely institutional. Rather, it was the product of an intricate dialectic between the individual and the formal.

We have seen that dignity, in Burke's eyes, was a quality that existed in institutions above all else. This was on account of their ability to inspire reverence in others, on account of their grandeur and their age. The dignity of individual human beings derived from this institutional dignity, but this relationship was neither simple nor one-dimensional. Institutional dignity could itself be expressed only through the existence of the individual human beings who manifested it, whether this be by carrying out a state function or simply by observing proper manners towards their friends. The next section will explore the implications of this kind of dignity for the social order.

3. Dignity and the social order

We have established that dignity had both an institutional and an individual character. Dignity pertained to institutions, titles and ranks, but their dignity could only be manifested in the individual human being who represented them. There was, however, an important condition here: the individuals in question should have a claim to the title that was itself legitimated by ancient custom. For example, a monarch who had succeeded legitimately could derive dignity from their position regardless of their behaviour, as Charles II had proved.

Nonetheless, there were instances in which individuals wielded power to which they had no legitimate claim, and this created a paradox. One such instance occurred in 1779, when Scottish pamphleteers succeeded in exciting riots against Catholic relief legislation. For Burke, as we have seen, commanding some kind of authority within a society would always bestow a kind of dignity, regardless of the rank, character or condition of the holder, insofar as authority was productive of reverence. However, if they were not worthy of the power they

wielded, then the dignity that it bestowed upon them would grate against their inferior station. As such, he acknowledged that the pamphleteers did indeed some have some dignity on account of the power they had demonstrated: “Those who have shewn that they have power in a country are not *contemptible*” (*Correspondence*, IV, 54 n.1). Yet, as much as this may have been sufficient to lift them out of contempt, they were still ignoble, in his eyes, for spouting persuasive “*nonsense*” that had excited men to “barbarities” (*Correspondence*, IV, 54 n.1, 55). In other words, the dignity they had from their power did not fit their persons.

The problem, then, that the French Revolution (and indeed any mass politics) posed was that very few people *could*, in Burke’s thinking, attain dignity. Without the social position that might have lent them dignity, members of the Third Estate were hardly suited to make laws for their country: “The occupation of a hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honour to any person — to say nothing of other more servile employment [...] the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule” (*Reflections*, 205-6). Perhaps these people *might* earn a dignity that would qualify them for self-rule, if they succeeded in improving their virtue: certainly Bourke believes Burke left this possibility open, even if by circumstance most actual virtue was concentrated in the higher orders.¹⁸ At other times, however, Burke seems to suggest that the humble orders were condemned to be brutes. As he wrote in 1791: “It is not their necessity, but their nature that impels them” (*Writings and Speeches*, VIII, 311). At any rate, in their present social condition, there was no reason to respect them; and until they merited respect, they would be without dignity. Much better to ensure that power rested only with those who would wield it within constraints towards a justified end—which,

¹⁸ Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 715-6. See also *Reflections*, 138. Ironically, this position is identical to that of Priestley in *Political Writings*, 15.

circumstantially, meant placing it in the hands of those who were accustomed to wielding it, those who were already dignified on account of their revered station and their place in the constitution (*Reflections*, 161-4). Dignity in society could only be maintained, then, through the preservation of the established social and political order, the ancient constitution that determined where power must lie.

So far, Burke seems unreceptive to the possibility that the lower orders might be dignified. In keeping with Meyer's claim that he would afford them only "dignity by proxy", he seems to suggest that lower orders could only receive their dignity from the respect that the higher orders, secure in their own dignity, bestowed upon them: "Full of dignity themselves, they respect dignity in all, but they feel it sacred in the unhappy" (*Writings and Speeches*, VIII, 310). The dignity of a whole society, in other words, rested on its exaltation of individual distinction, on the respect it paid to the great and good. In a society that did show greatness the awe that was due to it the humble were to gain their own kind of dignity *by* revering their superiors. Indeed, in Burke's view, the French had known this very well before 1789, during the long centuries in which "they valued themselves on the generous qualities which distinguished the chiefs of their nation" (*Writings and Speeches*, IV, 401).

But there was a softer side to his attitude towards those of lower social standing. It is essential not to caricature Burke as an untrammelled admirer of hierarchy and of those at its peak. He warns in *Reflections* not to imagine "that I wish to confine power, authority, and distinction to blood and names and titles" (206). And he believed accordingly that qualities like humility and submission to authority produced a genuine kind of dignity in all those who had them, whether they belonged to the lower or the upper orders. This is plain in his famous praise for the chivalric mindset as "that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that

subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom” (*Reflections*, 238). And, importantly, he did not render the lowly completely dependent on the reflected dignity of the mighty, nor vest them with a duty of total subordination. He recognised a dignity in the lower orders that could be autonomous of that of the great. In the event that the upper orders proved less than enthusiastic in upholding the chivalric ethic, the humble man could instead become dignified by comparing his simple virtue with their self-indulgent vice, reflecting patiently on the heavenly reward that awaited him, which would “put him in mind of a state in which the privileges of opulence will cease, when he will be equal by nature, and may be more than equal by virtue” (*Reflections*, 197). Yet in either case, whether the lower orders were bathing in the reflected dignity of the mighty, or reflecting on their own humble dignity in comparison with a degenerate ruling class, the dignity of the whole of society was still dependent on the existence of some kind of hierarchy and on reverence for greatness – be it great rank, great age, or great virtue.

There were also some time-tested institutions that Burke credited with bestowing dignity on a much broader swathe of the population. We have seen that manners and commerce fit into this category. However, the most notable of them was hereditary property. The connection in Burke’s mind between property and dignity was evident as early as the 1760s, when he embarked on parliamentary campaign against legislation in Ireland that deprived Catholics of the right of primogeniture. In one of his tracts on this subject, he conjured up an image of the unscrupulous family members of a Catholic father, armed with malicious laws designed to restrict the inheritance of property in Catholic families, taking it in turns to humiliate him in the courts by robbing him of what was rightfully his (*Writings and Speeches*, IX 437-42). Without security of inheritance, dignity – and specifically men’s dignity – was imperilled. This cause would gain urgency again in 1790 when the French

revolutionaries seized Church property. In *Reflections*, Burke identified the individual right to property as a mainstay of a healthy state: “it is to the property of the citizen [...] that the first and original faith of civil society is pledged” (272). In jeopardising the inviolability of property, Burke feared, the Revolution risked undermining the institution altogether, which would be to abolish the dignity that all property-owners received from their title.

Religion, likewise, which Burke sometimes described as a kind of title for believers (*Writings and Speeches*, IX, 608) had the power to lift all in society to a state of dignity. Ever far from Toryism, he did not credit Anglicanism with any special capacity in this regard. On the contrary, all faith raised a mind to dignity, regardless of its specific creed: he described French Catholic monks as “persons, whom the fictions of a pious imagination raises to dignity by construing in the service of God” (*Reflections*, 333). However, he did believe in the necessity of an established Church that would “operate with a wholesome awe upon free citizens” to consecrate the state itself (*Reflections*, 257). And the English Church specifically played a vital role in mediating between the dignity of the upper and lower ranks, because it vested its clergy with an importance to which the nobility had to bow: the English, he wrote,

will not suffer the insolence of wealth and titles, or any other species of proud pretension, to look down with scorn upon what they look up to with reverence; nor presume to trample on that acquired personal nobility, which they intend always to be, and which often is the fruit, not the reward, (for what can be the reward?) of learning, piety, and virtue (*Reflections*, 268).

Religion had, of course, the capacity to become enthusiasm, and this must be guarded against (*Writings and Speeches*, IX, 278). But, properly observed, it guaranteed the dignity of the faithful and acted as a restraint on the overweening dignity of the powerful.

To summarise: the dignity of all was dependent on general respect for the constitution, understood in Burke's terms as the whole ensemble of political and social structures that had been constructed by prior generations. Titles, be they social stations, membership of a Church or a more literal title to property, bestowed dignity upon their holders. Maintaining (useful and justified) social hierarchy, designed to elevate the meritorious few rather than to humiliate the many, guaranteed the dignity of all ranks. As such, ill-conceived attempts, to abolish time-honoured institutions, such as social hierarchy or institutions with a broader base like property, risked bringing about the end of dignity.

4. The political implications of dignity

Burkean dignity, for its progenitor, had profound implications for the state and society. It played an essential role in upholding a solid and healthy political order and ensuring that the country would be governed well. This section will explain why he was so distraught at the idea, whose contours were mapped out above, that those in authority might not have a dignity that matched the power they wielded. It argues that Burke understood this as a threat to wise, stable governance.

The effect of a dignified institutional framework was to inculcate the individuals within it with the right kind of disposition, another of Burke's favourite categories. The importance of disposition in Burke's political thought cannot be overstated. By his own account, all questions of state ultimately returned to disposition (*Reflections*, 180, 194, 220). It defined how peoples were to be governed: the style of government must be fitted to the people's disposition, which the state must, in turn, strive to improve (*Writings and Speeches*, VIII, 312-3). But it also had a more individual meaning. A person's disposition was what qualified or disqualified them for political participation. When, in a letter to the Duke of Portland in

1779, he declared Thomas Grenville (son of the former prime minister George Grenville) unfit to be an MP, it was on grounds of the “high and domineering Temper” that characterised his family, who, he feared, lacked “equal and sociable dispositions” (*Correspondence*, IV, 151). However, someone who, in contrast with the Grenvilles, cultivated the right disposition would know by intuition to abide by a particular approach to the art of politics.

In what, then, did this right disposition consist? A good disposition for governance was a dignified disposition: it is no wonder Burke lists as one of the great dangers of democracy that “all moral principle, all sense of dignity, all use of judgment, and all consistency of character” may be extinguished in those who govern (*Reflections*, 355). Only someone with sufficient dignity would be able to discern which course should be followed and pursue it without deviation. This was not a prescriptive idea: a dignified disposition was above all a prudent one, and as such might recommend very different measures depending on the situation. Such a prudent approach to politics was proof, for Burke, that one had the right understanding of how to wield power that came with a dignified disposition: “Shew the thing you contend for to be reason; shew it to be common sense; shew it to be the means of attaining some useful end; and then I am content to allow it what dignity you please” (*Writings and Speeches*, II, 418).¹⁹ Sometimes this would mean pressing one’s claims without compromise, but at moments of crisis – for example, a time of burgeoning discord, when Parliament was unlikely to get its own way – it was fitting of “the dignity of a ruling people” to make a concession that was “gratuitous, unconditional, and not held out as matter of bargain and sale” (*Writings and Speeches*, III, 162).

¹⁹ See also Burke, *Correspondence*, 4:79.

The exemplar of this principle was the American war, in which he thought that the dignified course for Parliament was to show magnanimity to its foes: “Fallen we certainly are; and a pompous language ill becomes our Condition; but still there is decorum, even in the humility of decayd greatness, which ought never to be parted with” (*Correspondence*, IV, 70).²⁰ Such munificence should not be mistaken for benevolence, which for Burke had “a consanguinity” with humility; dignity, in contrast, “belongs to the family of Fortitude” (*Writings and Speeches*, IX, 202). But there was more dignity in a pragmatic retreat than in stubbornly insisting on getting one’s own way. In sum, a dignified politics would exhibit self-certainty in its policies and ideas of justice, but not allow itself to ossify into “perseverance in absurdity” (*Writings and Speeches*, II, 418).

Governing in this dignified, magnanimous manner would carry out the essential role of maintaining the people’s confidence in their rulers. Burke believed that the transition from humanity’s primitive early state into civil society had required sacrificing the right of self-governance to the necessity of trust in government (*Writings and Speeches*, III, 157). Without this trust, governments could not function. Hence, in the prelude to the American war, the cyclical policy of successive British ministries towards the colonists, issuing threats and then making concessions, had failed because it had undermined any trust the Americans might have in “the dignity and consistency of our own future proceedings” (*Writings and Speeches*, III, 136). Real dignity should have “relented as it was soothed”: a dignified approach to governance here recommended giving without expectation of return, precisely in order that it would receive in exchange the confidence of the governed (*Writings and Speeches*, III, 322). Inculcating a dignified disposition in those who governed would ensure that a relationship of

²⁰ Bromwich recognises the importance of magnanimity in Burke’s thought but does not explicitly link it with dignity: see *Intellectual Life*, 260.

trust continued to bind rulers and ruled together. By establishing relationships of trust, it stabilized relations between governor and governed. Burkean dignity, in other words, was the very lifeblood of politics.

His preoccupation with the right disposition to govern animated Burke's opposition to the Revolution-inspired ideas developing amongst some of his peers. In particular, it was what made Burke so sceptical of Richard Price's proposal that the king be considered a servant of the public. His direct response to Price in *Reflections* is typically dry: "how either he or we should be much mended by it, I cannot imagine. I have seen very assuming letters, signed, Your most obedient, humble servant" (179). But we might derive deeper insight into the very real concern that this proposal would have excited in Burke from a speech he made in his constituency of Bristol in 1780, in which he argued that governors' very capacity to serve the public good was predicated on the disposition granted by their superior dignity: "If we degrade and deprave their minds by servility, it will be absurd to expect that they who are creeping and abject towards us, will ever be bold and incorruptible assertors of our freedom" (*Writings and Speeches*, III, 625). Given that he made this speech in his own defence against constituents who felt that he had been more a Member of Parliament for Burke than for Bristol, we might think his logic more than a little self-serving. Nonetheless, it fits his thinking in *Reflections*. The king could serve the people only as their master, because only a master was fit to govern: if he were stripped of his dignity, then he would lack the disposition necessary to rule. Trying to transform those who ruled into the servants of the ruled would only prevent them from ruling at all. Not only trust, then, but also positive authority would vanish from the long-established institutions that governed society: now under "enslaved ministers" and a "captive king", in France "there were neither law, nor authority, nor power

left to protect” (*Reflections* 230). A society ruled by people without a dignity appropriate to their station was perhaps a society without any rule at all.

The institutional dignity that Burke envisaged was, then, vital to ensure that those who ruled would be suited to their position. Those who cultivated a dignified disposition would instinctively understand how to rule wisely and maintain the trust of those whom they ruled. But this would only be possible for as long as they benefited from the dignity that an ancient constitution and its long-standing institutions alone could bestow. Dignity can thus help to explain why prescription was so paramount for Burke: without the ancient constitution there could be no dignity, and without dignity the state must be governed poorly. The implications of this for the here and now were grave enough, but equally troublesome for Burke was the impact this would have on the intergenerational contract. To rob institutions of their authority today was to bequeath the next generation a society without authority – in effect, to plunge them into anarchy.

5. Burkean dignity and revolutionary dignity

In previous sections, we have seen that Burke’s understanding of dignity as grounded in awe and reverence meant that he was readier to attribute it to institutions than to people, and above all to the ancient constitution that lent grandeur to all of these institutions. At the same time, he was convinced of the necessity that institutions have a human face in order to excite the proper feelings of respect in the masses. As such, dignity had to be sustained by a complex web that linked laws, customs, political structures and individuals together. Dismantling them risked bringing about the end of dignity, and this, since good governance was dependent on the dignified disposition of those who governed, could be the ruin of government and of society itself. This conviction formed a central pillar of Burke’s

intolerance of radical, rationalistic change to the constitution. Little wonder, then, that in *Reflections* Burke explicitly identifies the revolutionaries' misunderstanding of the workings of dignity in society as their central error. If, he argued, they had restored their old constitution and its institutions, instead of starting anew, they might have given their "recovered freedom a correspondent dignity" (186). This section will explore how the conception of dignity outlined above clashed with the vision of human dignity that, by the end of Burke's career, was being extolled across the Channel.

Burke was, of course, well aware that dignity also animated revolutionary apologia – a version of dignity much more familiar to us, innate to human beings and universal (in principle). His main target in *Reflections*, Richard Price, after all used it as a mainstay of his case for the Revolution in his *Discourse on the Love of our Country*: "In Spain, in Germany, and under most of the governments of the world, mankind are in a similar state of humiliation. Who, that has a just sense of the dignity of his nature, can avoid execrating such a debasement of it?" (*Political Writings*, 186).

This phrase, "the dignity of his nature", is telling. Burke was likely always destined to have a profound antipathy towards any conception of dignity rooted in human nature. As Bourke has shown, Burke was suspicious of appeals to nature, though without ever rejecting them outright.²¹ That is hardly surprising: he spent much of his political career opposing political arguments that claimed to derive from insights into human nature. Among these was the "doctrine of equality of all men", the argument propagated by partisans of Lord North's

²¹ Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 71-9, 87-91, 438, 623-6, *passim*. See also Tomaselli, "Introduction" in *A Vindication*, xxiv for both Burke and Wollstonecraft's occasional championing of nature over civilisation. Cf. O'Neill, "John Adams versus Mary Wollstonecraft", 457. See Haakonssen, "German Natural Law", 251, and Moore, "Natural Rights", 296-8, for the complex implications, subversive and otherwise, of the natural jurisprudence tradition in Burke's time.

ministry that, all men being *by nature* equally corrupt, the opposition could not be less corrupt or ineffective than North and his ministers if they were to enter government (*Correspondence*, IV, 25, 25 n.2).

It is true that Burke did also use the term ‘nature’ in ways that implied that he did not reject the idea of a basic and immutable human nature. Indeed, he insisted that what qualified a man for political life was his understanding of human nature, because successful political decisions must always accommodate it.²² On other occasions he recognizes a certain dynamism in man’s nature, even the possibility that it might shape political reality: “Man is a gregarious animal. He will by degrees provide some convenience suitable to this his natural disposition.”²³ But this did not necessarily mean that he thought there to be an eternal and unchanging human nature. He frequently used the term ‘natural’ simply to mean ‘appropriate to its circumstances’.²⁴ For him there were two kinds of human nature: “as that nature is universal, or as it is modified by local habits and social aptitudes” (*Writings and Speeches*, IV, 470).²⁵ Politics, he thought, should take into account the historical, essentially contingent human nature that had been produced by socialisation, but not allow itself to be swayed by much consideration for humanity’s pre-social nature. As such, there was no space in his thought for a conception of dignity as something inalienably part of human nature. As Bourke argues, Burke’s belief was that most of humanity’s primordial nature needed to be, not repressed as such, but adapted and civilized in the arc of growing sociability.²⁶ This process was, in fact, in accordance with man’s God-given nature, which was made to be perfected by

²² For examples, see *Correspondence*, 4:86; *Writings and Speeches*, IV:470, VI:302, VIII:318; *Reflections*, 151, 242, 299.

²³ Quoted in O’Brien, “Introduction” in Burke, *Reflections*, 17.

²⁴ See for example *Writings and Speeches*, VIII:332, III:321.

²⁵ See also Bromwich, “Human Nature”, 38, for Burke’s notion of human nature as something simultaneously sovereign and mutable.

²⁶ Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 626; see also Hall, “Rights and the Heart”, 615, although on 610 she seems to take the view that Burke *does* favour arguments direct from nature.

society. As Burke put it in *Reflections*: “He who gave our nature to be perfected by our virtue willed also the necessary means of its perfection—He willed therefore the state” (262). It could be considered perverse and indeed impious to believe that primitive “natural” human dignity had any claim to be realised in the present day, especially not at the expense of the truer dignity that had developed under divine direction from the refining influences of society.

Indeed, even in his early career he was already keen to stress that dignity was a product of society, and not of human nature. In the inscrutable ironic voice of his *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), he pointed out that republican governments that claimed to be closer to men’s nature had failed to draw out their – supposedly natural – dignity. In Poland, for example, which at least “has at present the name of republic”, the people “are not only politically, but personally slaves, and treated with the utmost indignity” (*Writings and Speeches*, I, 159-60). Even if dignity *were* ingrained in human nature, then, that was no reason to imagine that it would or should seamlessly persist into artificial society; nor that any government should be capable of retrieving it from the depths of human prehistory.

This was not the only aspect of revolutionary dignity that alarmed Burke. For the revolutionaries, natural dignity was closely associated with freedom, and it was the highest expression of the people’s freedom that they should be entitled to remake the constitution as they willed. In Burke’s view, this freedom, without the dignity of long-established use, could be nothing more than a socially destructive arbitrariness (*Reflections*, 151, 185, 188). True freedom, he thought, must be mediated by institutions that would shape people’s desires and purposes and thereby *give* dignity to the will that worked towards them: “All other people

have laid the foundations of civil freedom in severer manners, and a system of more austere and masculine morality” (*Reflections*, 189).

Indeed, what was so terrifying about revolutionary freedom was that it rested on the foreclosure of this more genuine, dignified freedom. Paradoxically, the apparently free choice to remake the state permanently would deprive the people of the sole truly dignifying choice available to them: a constitution that honoured their own past. This was why the British regarded the hereditary succession “as among their *rights*, not as among their wrongs” (*Reflections*, 175).²⁷ Burke’s conviction on this point is evident from at least the mid-1760s: “an opinion at once new and persecuting is a monster, because in the very instant in which it takes a liberty of change, it does not leave to you even a liberty of perseverance” (*Writings and Speeches*, II, 467). To revolutionize the state was to deny oneself the choice of the old, whose dignity, which it reflected on to those living in it, could never be recovered. This was, in the final analysis, what Burke found so horrifying about the French Republic: “a system, which makes life without dignity, and death without hope” (*Writings and Speeches*, IX, 238). Revolutionary dignity, with its demand for what he saw as a kind of atavistic licence, already and inevitably meant the death of true dignity, because its assertion that the immediate will was superior to established precedent already implied that the reverence in which ancient things were held, which sustained their dignity, was gone.

For Burke, the licence that grew from revolutionary dignity was, as he makes clear in *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, something closer to vanity: a self-love that drove men to assert their individual rights at the expense of the stability of the state. Vanity was a disaster for civil society because it “makes the whole man false. It leaves nothing

²⁷ My italics.

sincere or trustworthy about him” (*Writings and Speeches*, VIII, 313). Indeed, he doubted the sincerity of revolutionary dignity itself, seeing it as nothing more than a cover for self-serving manipulation: he castigated those who “sanctified their ambition by advancing the dignity of the people whose peace they troubled” (*Reflections*, 203-4). The language of dignity was really nothing more than a cover for the vanity of the revolutionary leaders.

This vanity was worrying to Burke because it threatened the trust whose importance was laid out in the previous section. This made it a particular threat to one vital institution, commerce, which inevitably depended on ties of trust between those who exchanged their goods. The apostle of vanity, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had after all notoriously preferred to spend his life pleading poverty than to accept a living from others, or what Burke called “the just price of common labor, as well as the tribute which opulence owes to genius, and which, when paid, honors the giver and the receiver” (*Writings and Speeches*, VIII, 314). There could be no exchange without good faith, and that required an assurance that all parties would honour their obligations, not press their interests at the expense of others. And vanity presented a more general threat to other long-established institutions and customs. Since the vain sought approval rather than truth, they would attack everything valuable in order to excite controversy and make a name for themselves, until no-one would any longer be able to accept values and institutions on trust.²⁸ True dignity should not corrode social bonds, but reinforce them, by establishing and reproducing trust. Revolutionary dignity, in contrast, was inimical to civil society itself, a threat to confidence between people and rulers, and thus to the very foundations of politics.

²⁸ Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 741-2, 756-8.

However, even in his own time, Burke could perhaps see that the revolutionary conception of dignity was in the ascendant, especially in the final years before his death in 1797, when his work took a markedly pessimistic turn. Dermot Ryan ascribes this despondency to Burke's anxieties regarding the democratic technology of print, but, while these were certainly important, we should not neglect the late Burke's fear of the intoxicating effects of the "Rights of Man" discourse itself, with its attendant conception of human dignity.²⁹ In *Reflections*, we find him noting drily that the rights of men had appealed so much to French peasants that they had begun to cite them against the nascent republic itself: in doing so, he acknowledged that the discourse of native human dignity had become sufficiently entrenched that it could even be used against its proponents (392, 398). We might speculatively read the same worries into his later *Letters on a Regicide Peace* by noting a telling omission. When, in these works, he sought to explain the causes of the Revolution, he both rejected all possible economic explanations for the Revolution and denied that pre-revolutionary France had been riven with political or social conflicts (*Writings and Speeches*, IX, 190). He left out one other explanation that, we should note, recommended itself to contemporaries like Wollstonecraft: that the people, without external pressure or provocation, had become possessed of a conviction in their right to self-determination, of a sense of their own dignity and what was owed to it, and decided to make a government for themselves. It seems that he could not bring himself even to mention this possibility. Burke, in this most poignant of his final works, seems haunted by the prospect that revolutionary dignity owned the future.

²⁹ Ryan, "New Description of Empire", 1-2. See also Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 24.

6. Conclusion

Burke never systematically expounded a concept of dignity, which is perhaps one reason why the term has been overlooked in the scholarship on his work. However, reconstructing the meaning of the term as it appeared in his writings reveals that dignity was essential to his political ideas. Dignity was the prize of his ideal constitution, a hierarchical political society blessed by long experience. In such a society, dignity clung to the higher orders, inspired the whole population with a sense of awe and reverence, and in doing so served two vital political roles: maintaining the manners that managed and channeled private affections, upholding bonds of trust within civil society, ensuring good governance by instilling the right disposition in those who ruled, and maintaining the stability of the public realm. His opposition to the Revolution becomes clearer when we observe that for him, the overthrow of the French monarchy and aristocratic privileges meant pulling dignity up by the root.

Burke's account of a dignified society can also give us an alternative perspective on the historical evolution of the modern concept of dignity. Through it, we can recognize how political institutions might be considered to bestow a certain kind of dignity on those who wield power, which acts to legitimate but also regulate their rule. It points to a kind of dignity that is embodied in community and shared customs, rather than in sovereign individuals. These various threads could lead us towards a more holistic, and perhaps a more coherent, understanding of the role that dignity plays in modern politics. A modern Burkean dignity might stress the comfort and freedom afforded to us, not necessarily by the institutions that the man himself cherished (most of which have long since disappeared), but by the shared practices and customs that underpin social life.

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