What is Human Dignity?

By Mette Lebech, Faculty of Philosophy, National University of Ireland, Maynooth

The English expression 'human dignity' consists of the predicate 'human' and the noun 'dignity'. The adjective qualifies the noun, thus determining the kind of dignity in question as the human kind. The adjective has a similar function in the expression 'human being': Here it qualifies the noun 'being', to determine the kind of being in question as a being of the human kind. 'Human' is etymologically related to the Latin for earth, *humus*, so that 'human' means what is 'earthly' (as an adjective), or an 'earthling' (as a substantive). Generally speaking it means what is proper to the kind that 'we' are, or to the species of rational animals, referring in particular to their kindness (humanity) and their fallibility ('all too human').

'Dignity' comes from the Latin noun *decus*, meaning ornament, distinction, honour, glory. *Decet* is the verbal form (which is impersonal), and is related to the Greek δοκειν – to seem or to show. The Latin participle form decens, -tis, has survived in the English language in the adjective 'decent'. But dignity means, generally speaking, the standing of one entitled to respect, i.e. his or her status, and it refers to that which in a being (in particular a personal being) induces or ought to induce such respect: its excellence or incomparability of value.

Paradoxically, *dignitas* translated the Greek αχιομα, when Latin was adapted so as to deal with logic, thus indicating that dignity, despite its 'showiness', is really something to be taken for granted, like a first principle. *Dignitas* is understood to be self-imposing, important by virtue of itself; and even if it relies on something else that has given it, or that guarantees its status, it is understood to impose *itself*, in and through the authority given. As it cannot be reduced to what founds it, it is indeed comparable to an axiom, which must be taken for granted. *Dignitas* therefore is, with a neologism, a 'δοχα αχιοματικη', something taught to be first, a highest value.

When 'human' and 'dignity' are used in conjunction they form the expression 'human dignity', which means the status of human beings entitling them to respect, a status which is first and to be taken for granted. It refers to their highest value, or to the fact that they are a presupposition for value, as they are those to whom value makes sense.

Value is disclosed in feeling and it affects us deeply and personally. The highest values affect us at the deepest possible level. As I recognise the other, his value is experienced as equivalent to mine, because it is a presupposition for his valuing activity, just as mine is for me. Love, kinship and friendship are the human relationships in which I am enabled to explore these depths, and to realise that this highest value is constitutive of personal identity, simultaneously in myself and in the other. The *idea* of human dignity conceptualises or embraces this experience of recognition, and the *principle* of human dignity is the affirmation that the experience is possible in relation to all human beings. When formulated, the principle affirms the

fundamental value of every human being, or of human beings as such. It enjoys general acceptance all round the globe as a basic ethical and legal principle because it draws upon the universal experience of the dynamics of recognition. It clearly is in everyone's interest to be respected as having human dignity, i.e. as having the highest value due to an inalienable humanity.

1. The Approach

The principle of human dignity, as a universal affirmation that human beings have the highest value, does not itself have a history, because a universal statement is meant to have limits neither in space nor in time. But the idea of human dignity does have a history in so far as it has been thought to rely on various things and consequently been accounted for in various ways.

The expression 'human dignity' seems to emerge rather slowly from a context where the term 'dignity' is used in appreciation of the importance of human individuals. It probably became part of current usage at the same time and for the same reasons as the expression 'human person' does. The 1948 *Declaration of Human Rights* testifies to the currency of both terms, but a systematic usage of the term 'human dignity' was not the object of philosophic investigation before then, however surprising this may seem.[1] But then, within the Human Rights tradition flowing from this document, the term of 'human dignity' is constantly used to express the basic intuition from which human rights proceed. It is meant as the basic principle upon which human rights are understood to rest. It is said to be inherent in each and every person, and also to be inalienable.

We may talk about four stages in the development of the idea of human dignity. Each depends on a time-typical framework and exemplifies a logical possibility. Cicero may represent the cosmo-centric framework of Antiquity, which explains human dignity on the basis of nature (2). Thomas Aquinas represents the Middle Ages' Christo-centric framework, which explains human dignity in relation to Jesus Christ (3). Immanuel Kant can represent the logo-centric framework of Modernity, explaining human dignity as a tribute to reason (4). Whereas Mary Wollstonecraft, finally, represents the polis-centred framework of Post-Modernity, which explains human dignity in relation to social acceptability (5). Each of these ways of accounting for human dignity can be understood as a source of the idea as it appears in the *Declaration of Human Rights*.

Frameworks change because patterns of social organisation change. A new understanding of social status ends up changing the way things are accounted for, and hence a 'framework' can be defined as a world-view so widely shared or publicised that to question its presuppositions during the period itself incurs heavy penalties. It is an empirico-systematic structure, consisting in a series of conventions defining a way of living with all its practical and theoretical problems.[2] It is what makes mainstream thought 'mainstream'.

2. The Cosmo-Centric Account

In the Roman Republic as well as in the succeeding Empire, *Dignitas* was the standing of the one who commanded respect, whether because of his political, military or administrative achievements. The Greeks had another term for a like reality: αξια, meaning the worth whereby someone or something counts for more or less. This term is at the root of our *axiom,* because it denotes a claim to have other claims follow from it, and also of the discipline of *axiology*, the theory of value. Aristotle in fact defines αξια in the *Nichomachean Ethics* as 'a term of relation. It denotes having a claim to goods external to oneself.'[3] *Axia* in turn depends both on character and on evaluation by society; and it therefore tends towards equalisation within the relationship of friendship, as it both educates character and appreciates the equal worth of the other. But Aristotle does not seem to entertain the idea that all human beings, simply because they are human, possess *axia*. Indeed, *axia* is precisely what distinguishes among them: they are not equal, or entitled to the same status, and justice consists in making distribution according to their different *axia*.

Cicero, on the other hand, probably due to the influence of Stoicism, refers to the idea of *dignitas humana*, even though only once: *De Officiis* 6, 106. This special status is due to the superior mind of humans, which obliges them to stay superior to the beasts. 'From this we see that sensual pleasure is quite unworthy of human dignity, and that we ought to despise it and cast it from us; but if someone should be found who sets some value upon sensual gratification, he must keep strictly within the limits of moderate indulgence.'[4]

To Cicero dignity is, as it was for any Roman, a very important concept. He defines it as what merits respect,[5] whether mediated by an office or by the sheer excellence of virtue. In turn it defines justice (as a)/cia did for Aristotle): 'justice is the habit of mind which gives to everyone according to desert (*dignitas*) while preserving the common advantage.'[6] So, the fact that humans have dignity not only obliges them to remain superior to the beasts, but it also entitles them to rule the world. This is so because there is nothing more divine than reason; in fact human beings share with the gods this marvelous power. As a consequence Gods and humans also share justice and law,[7] and thus live in and share the same commonwealth, which is the Universe, the Cosmos.

However, whereas humans are in some way equal, namely in relation to the brutes and to the gods, they are not equal in all respects. There exist inequalities in nature that makes some more deserving than others. This is why a democracy without distinctions in rank would be inequitable and would not last.[8] Like Aristotle before him, Cicero was in favour of an aristocracy built on merit, the merit in question preferably being acquired by action in conformity with what is fitting (*decus*). Thus dignity should be obtained and respected by justice. Natural law, right reason or the law respected by gods and humans alike, would admit of this form of aristocracy,

which Cicero considers natural. Plainly, the Universe of the Ancients was hierarchically ordered.

Thus Cicero, despite his Stoicism, was not quite an egalitarian. The kind of society in which he lived was of course also far from being so, for it admitted slavery and afforded no political participation to women. The human dignity referred to by Cicero implied equality before the gods and the brutes, however, and obliged humans to self-respect and proper behaviour; and it ought to be the basis for the laws of the Republic, as Cicero saw it.

In the cosmo-centric framework, dignity refers to the prerogative of governing, i.e. to the status of the one who is in command, either of himself, or of his household, or of some office within the State. The corresponding virtue in women is beauty, and thus Cicero seems, in accordance with the cosmo-centric framework, not to have made up his mind as to the human dignity of women.[9] The case of slaves is not argued, and it perhaps could not have been, granted the strength of the framework. Whether therefore human dignity was in Cicero's eyes universally inherent in the individual and inalienable, and whether it entailed the right to political status, is far from clear. It is possible that his understanding would not differ much in intension from the one current in the Human Rights tradition, but that it would indeed differ in extension, considering this tradition's emphasis on the eradication of racism and sexism. This divergence highlights a peculiar feature of the idea of human dignity, namely that its intension seems only vaguely to determine its extension. If this is the case it seems to imply that the intension also is vague. It is probable, however, that the apparent vagueness stems primarily from socio-economic interest, a feature that is definable for a framework, so that the sense human dignity makes, or rather, the reference it is thought to have, depends on this framework.

3. The Christo-Centric Account

In the Middle Ages the expression *dignitas humana* was not in common usage. But another related turn of phrase *dignitas conditionis humanae* (meaning the dignity of the human condition or creation) did have some limited currency. It inspired the title of a book attributed to Ambrose, which is, however, more likely to have been written four centuries after him by Alcuin: *De conditione dignitatis humanae.*[10] This book used *dignitas* interchangably with *persona*, and may be linked to the source of the anonymous scholastic Master to whom both Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great refer,[11] and who defined person as 'a subject distinguished by dignity'.

This understanding of personal dignity, or the understanding that the person is *a dignity*, is related to the use of the term *dignitas* in medieval logic. Thomas, like other Scholastics before and after him, used *dignitas* as the translation of the Greek αξιομα. A fundamental or self-evident principle, one upon which science (whether of mathemathics or of ethics) relies, would therefore be termed 'a dignity'. The term 'principle' in modern day English has in fact similar connotations: something (or someone) of basic importance, as in a 'School Principal'.

Thomas defines personhood as Boëthius did (*persona est substantia individua rationalis naturae*), but also, with the anonymous Master, as *hypostasis proprietate distincta ad dignitatem pertinente*. Whether this should be translated as 'a subject distinguished by dignity', or as 'a subject distinguished by a property pertaining to dignity', is immaterial for our enquiry, since 'dignity' in either case is the predicate which not only qualifies but identifies the subject. Thomas argues that if dignity were to be abstracted from the *hypostasis* then the person would be abstracted with it. Dignity, thus, like personhood, defines the subject in its individuality, while its rational nature determines its universal 'whatness.'[12] Dignity, in other words, is essential to the existence of the individual person: it is what the person is before anything else, it is what identifies it.

Like Cicero, Thomas Aquinas uses the phrase *dignitas humana* very rarely; in the *Summa Theologiae* only once.[13] He argues there that human beings can lose their human dignity if they deviate from the rational order by sinning, and that it is not necessarily bad to kill such sinners, despite the fact that to kill an innocent person in possession of natural dignity is evil. The possession of human dignity must therefore to some extent depend on remaining free and rational, or 'existing for oneself' (resp. obj. 2). Rationality may be a natural endowment, but it is not inert; it is demanding and its demands must be lived up to. To act against one's rational nature is degrading. In this Thomas is not very far from Cicero. Human dignity, for the latter, should also prevent someone from giving in to sensual pleasure and acting like the brutes: it was an ideal that had to be conformed to.

But did Aquinas really think that irrational behaviour, or 'sin', in his understanding, could destroy person-hood? If he did, he thought that the latter could also be redeemed and restored in Christ to the dignity of a child of God. Human dignity is a high degree of dignity in relation to the animals, but it is not the ultimate one. It is for example the basic one compared to the degrees of dignity in which superiors can be constituted. Even so, all degrees of dignity deserve an appropriate level of respect, because they, along with authority, are derived from God, and hence have priority, even if not over other, more prior, priorities.[14]

The Christo-centric framework could explain fundamental things, such as the importance of being human, in terms of the shared belief in a God made man in Christ. This shared belief also made it acceptable that human dignity to some extent was understood as destructible: it was after all given twice, first in Creation and again, but now even better, in Redemption, after it was marred by sin. This belief, perhaps, entailed that the status of non-Christians was uncertain. Christianity was so important for the social structure that not adhering to it was regarded an offence against the order of the day, much as statelessness would be today. But the Christian message of love of neighbour contributed decisively to reinforcing the recognition of the person-hood and human dignity of everyone, and indeed it still continues to do so. Without this present-day reminder of the absoluteness of love and of its absolute availability, it is doubtful whether faith in human rights would be sustainable.

4. The Logo-Centric Account

The experience of the Reformation and the religious wars following it made a lasting impact on all modern thinkers. They could afford to take very few things indeed for granted, as tradition and authority were widely questioned, and it was discovered that even the new institutions (such as the nation-state), put in the place of the old, had also to withstand the wind of criticism. The new world-view – the Enlightenment – attempted to explain anything and everything though some supposed relation to Reason.

Pico della Mirandola was the first to explain the dignity of man in relation to the latter's ability to choose what place or level he would occupy in the universe (*Oration on the Dignity of Man*).[15] But already Hobbes dampened these new ambitions, as he made clear just what the weight of social constraints is, once the gravitational force within an ordered universe has ceased to determine the objective directions of up and down. He contended that dignity is only the 'worth of a man', i.e. the price society sets on him.[16] If he has no predetermined kind or essence, he cannot have any predetermined value independently of the social evaluation of his usefulness.

It was against this background that Kant developed his idea of dignity, usually taken to be the main theme of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. He, however, like Cicero and Aquinas, used the concept of human dignity (*Würde der menschlichen Natur, Würde der Menschheit, Menschenwürde*) only relatively rarely, four times in all in *The Metaphysics of Morals*.[17]

Menschenwürde is only used once in connection with a discussion of the vice of arrogance. Here it is said that arrogance differs from pride, because pride is concerned with 'not yielding anything of one's human dignity in comparison with others.'[18] *Würde der menschlichen Natur* is also used only once.[19] Here it is said that autonomy is the reason for it, i.e. that it is because humans are autonomous (in other words they are capable of legislating the moral law unto themselves) that their nature is dignified. It is not therefore a big jump to speak of the dignity of humanity,[20] and to understand humanity itself as a dignity.[21] *Dignity*, however, is often used on its own, without the qualification 'human.' It is associated with the ultimate object of respect: the categorical imperative. Respect for humanity relies on this, and so does respect for human dignity.

The members of civil society, the citizens, ought in principle to be the same set as all those to whom the categorical imperative applies, namely all who are capable of originating it. This, however, seems so far from political practice that Kant find himself forced to distinguish between an active and a passive citizenship, the latter form being reserved to dependants of various kinds: slaves, serfs, women and children. Whereas the possession of dignity therefore does entitle one to legal status and to citizenship, it does not entitle one to political participation. However, Kant still maintains that 'only the united and consenting Will of all the people – in so far as each of them determines the same thing about all, and all determine the same thing about each – ought to have the power of enacting law in the state.'[22] It seems by this to be implied that a distinction in kinds of citizenship and legal rights can be maintained only when it is to the common advantage, and such maintenance is precisely what the framework provides.

Sometimes the logo-centric framework is called 'anthropocentric'. This designation is fitting because of the association of modernity and anthropocentrism, and also because Kant regards humanity itself as a dignity. It is also, however, misplaced, because Kant explains the importance of Man in relation to Reason, exemplifying hereby the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The identification of Man with the Citizen and of Reason with the justification of republicanism has inherent problems, which in turn (and in due time) provoke the rise of the post-modern framework. As a source of human rights, however, the logo-centric account, with its accentuation of autonomy as the principle of humanity, is still commonly relied upon. But as autonomy is either an invisible (moral) or a negotiated (political) reality, the extension of human dignity is left without an objective criterion, unless it be attached to human nature; in which case the problems of vagueness of extension are the same as those associated with the cosmo-centric account.

5. The Polis-Centred Account

It may seem an anachronism to make the Enlightenment philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft represent the Post-Modern era, which is generally taken to begin much later. It is justifiable, however, from the facts that she on the one hand shows signs of consciously stepping out of the framework of her times, and on the other inaugurates a new way of reflecting on, or speaking about, human dignity. She thus exemplifies how it is possible to step out of a framework and inaugurate a new. In a certain way both steps out of the older order are taken in virtue of the fact that she is a woman speaking in public about who is to count as a citizen. She finds her voice by means of a *utopian* vision of a world where all human beings would be happy. Her account can in this sense be called Polis-Centred, because it is dependent on a vision of the just (though merely future) State.

However, like Kant, she explains human dignity first in relation to reason. It is because of the gift of reason that man has dignity, and indeed that woman likewise has it. But Wollstonecraft's rationalism is tempered by a social realism that becomes evident in the polemical nature of her two Vindications: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). These are both addressed to politicians concerned with the French Revolution: the first to Edmund Burke, who defended aristocracy,[23] and the second to Bishop Talleyrand-Périgord, a leader of the Revolution. *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* was written in defence of the rights proclaimed by the Revolution, and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* out of disappointment over the lack of recognition of the rights of women displayed by the revolutionaries. Both works are thus about what we today – and indeed as a consequence of such works – call human rights.

Wollstonecraft, however, does not employ the term 'human dignity'. Instead she launches the concepts 'the native dignity of man', 'dignity of character' or 'dignity of virtue', in order to provide an alternative to the then-current understanding of dignity. The common understanding was that dignity was either inherited through liberal descent or acquired by Royal decree, and was thus a prerogative of the aristocracy. It

meant social distinction, much as it did in Antiquity, but the difference regarding the latter was that in Wollstonecraft's world, non-aristocrats gained a steady voice. She argues that dignity belongs to all those who care to be just and sensible, thus using the term against itself, so to speak, to appeal for a political change towards republicanism or even democracy, and towards the social inclusion of women. She vindicates the right of common men and women to be recognised in their native dignity because of their dignity of character, and this includes their right not to be held in slavery, whether this slavery takes the form of physical labour or sexual exploitation. Wollstonecraft sees in education the key to improve the status of the different members of society, but she is not expecting social change to happen quickly. When people are taught to be aware of their 'conscious dignity', they are less likely to let themselves be held in slavery of any kind. To break the habits of bondage, however, is a long-term enterprise. This is why she looks to the future with expectation, in such a manner as to detach herself from the Modern framework and step into another.

Post-Modernity, however, is often associated not only with polis-centrism but also with social constructivism. The life-experience of Mary Wollstonecraft was that an idea of dignity could be forged by society, and could pass as its natural basis even if it contradicted the regulative idea of equality, inherent in the experience of recognition ultimately legitimising social order. The rejection of Modernity as ideological clearly has this kind of explanation: common people, whose point of view had been overlooked for centuries, have gained a voice and brought with them the experience of being ignored. They had lived for a long time with a discrepancy between rhetoric and reality, and this had made them astute analysts of the relationship between rationality and social conditions. The idea of human dignity was the linguistic tool by which they themselves gained self-esteem and political influence, and it became therefore part of the Post-Modern framework, where it was thought to be the foundation for democracy and human rights.

This could be the reason why this framework does not easily accommodate those people who account for the idea of human dignity by reference to something other than the conservation of contemporary democratic society. Religious people, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, because their type of social organisation is not identical to that of the democratic State, have such an alternative. These differences make themselves most felt whenever the human being is most burdensome for society, whether criminal or ill. At that point any community dispenses itself of a principle it regards essentially as a means to its own preservation, and attacks those who place a strain upon its resources. Inconsistencies do not of themselves undermine the community, but the different standards, each taken to be absolute, *ipso facto* condition each other and hence give rise to the 'poly-point-of-view' of the polis-centric framework.

The four accounts of human dignity may have been developed each in its own historical context, but they coexist as a matter of fact in contemporary debates and often confront each other, especially in the areas where their extensions do not overlap. The question therefore arises whether there is a single common account of human dignity that can accommodate the insights peculiar to each framework.

6. Is there a Definition of Human Dignity?

The experience, idea, and principle of human dignity have to be presupposed for us to talk about different accounts of it. But the differences between the four accounts make it manifest that the fundamental value of human beings is taken to consist in different things.

In the cosmo-centric framework human beings are thought to have fundamental value because they have dominion (over their passions, their household or group, or over the brute beasts). It is to the end of maintaining moral dominion that human beings acquire virtue, and it is by this acquisition that they are able to participate in social life, to legislate and to found society. It is, however, nature that has assigned the human being a superior place in the cosmos, by granting reason for the task of dominion. It is the responsibility of the human being that this moral dominion should not fail. If it should, it is uncertain what would happen to human dignity. Moral dominion in accordance with nature is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the possession of human dignity; the possessor must also be of the human kind. But then again: It is because moral dominion is considered to be characteristic of human beings that it can be taken as a criterion for human dignity.

In the Christo-centric framework human beings are thought to have fundamental value because they are made in the image and likeness of God, and therefore reflect the creator-God in whom and from whom all things have their being and value. But the fundamental value of humans is also affirmed by the incarnation of the Son of God as man, and is even restored through his death and resurrection. The fundamental value of human beings, therefore, does not so much consist in their rationality or dominion as in their God-likeness and in the relationship with God this likeness brings about. It is this likeness which enables human beings to acquire virtue and to live in community, and which therefore in turn founds society and its laws. God's relationship must be accepted in love, however, if it is not, then it is uncertain what becomes of human dignity. Divine relatedness is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the possession of human dignity: The possessor must also be human. But then again: It is because humanity is considered to exist in the image and likeness of God that this reflexive likeness can be taken as a criterion for human dignity.

In the logo-centric framework human beings have dignity because of Reason, or, in the Kantian expression, because they are capable of understanding the implications of the 'universalisability' of any of the maxims of their actions. Virtue, in this scheme of things, is the characteristic of the kind of acts, the maxim of which is 'universalisable' according to the categorical imperative. Reason, also, is enough to certify status, account for law and found society, even if the ultimate destiny of man and his reward depends on God. No guarantee apart from reason is needed for human dignity in this life. If reason fails, however, it is uncertain what happens to human dignity. Reason is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the possession of human dignity. The possessor must also be human, belonging to the human kind. But then again: Humanity itself is considered a dignity because of its rationality, and this is the reason why rationality can be considered a criterion for human dignity.

The polis-centric framework was the result of the political experience of 'reason' being used ideologically by those in power, to make assumptions as to who was to be accounted reasonable. The polis-centric framework was born of the rejection of the one and unique point of view, hence it is also poly-centric and poly-morphic. Virtue is defined in relation to the function it has in society (for example, its usefulness), and status is understood in its aspect of relying on political decision. Society, in turn, is increasingly experienced as the basic, inescapable reality that stands in no need of founding because it is everywhere – just as nature was for the Ancients. Thus law becomes the set of rules which society gives to itself through its mechanisms of government, whereas the destiny of the individual is to be the reason for society's metabolism. Human dignity is what society ought to recognise as its foundation, ideology notwithstanding. If recognition fails, then it is uncertain what becomes of human dignity. Recognition is a possible consequence of, but not a necessary condition for, the possession of human dignity. The possessor must also be of the human kind. But then again: it is because personal identity is understood to consist essentially in social relations that recognition was able to be made a criterion for human dignity in the first place.

Human dignity as the fundamental value of human beings is common to the frameworks treated, yet each understands it to rely upon, or to be conditioned by, different features of human reality: human nature; God-relatedness; the faculty of reason; or recognition within society. This is because the four conceptions each understand the human to consist in different things, and consequently take the fundamental value of the human being to consist in different aspects of its being. The human being exists in and through these aspects, which characterise it essentially. Fundamental value, however, pertains to the individual human being and not merely to its nature, faith, reason or status. Herein the frameworks agree. Hence they also agree that human dignity pertains to the human being as such, even if they disagree as to what exactly it is that justifies this attribution.

The definition: 'Human dignity is the fundamental value of the human being', is merely formal, however. To account for the content of human dignity we are referred back to the experience of its fullness in love, kinship and friendship. In these I learn to identify with the essential attributes focused on by each of the frameworks. I learn what it means to be human.

Nature accounts for my physical and psychic structure, my abilities and powers, it is symbolically intelligible in my genetic constitution, and it accounts for the material exchange with my surroundings in growth and decay. If I did not identify myself with my nature, I could account for none of my physical attributes. Idealistic, solipsistic or dualistic tendencies wish to depreciate this explanatory factor, with the upshot that no account could be given of my physical individuality as a person.

Reason accounts for the integration of physicality and personal experience in a unity, especially in the building of character. It also accounts for the kind and level of communication and creativity that integrates human society. Such integration relies on access to ideal reality through abstraction, intuition and discursive reasoning; it relies on reason. If I did not identify myself as reasonable I could not account for my psyche or my intelligence. Materialist, naturalist or behaviourist tendencies

underestimate this explanatory factor, with the result that they are unable to account for my spiritual transcendence as a person.

God accounts for the joining of nature with the realm of reason in the individual rational soul, which has powers to move in the physical world as well as powers to access the ideal world. Only a power exceeding both of these could effectuate such a synthesis, which accounts also for the spiritualisation of appetite in emotion and evaluation. If I did not identify myself with this synthesis, I could find no reason to act in accordance with universal laws and no reason to realise the good. Some might not call this power God. Some neo-Darwinists, for instance, stretch natural selection to the point of making it account for the experience of the ideal, and not merely for its practicality. This form of Darwinism is materialistic in tendency, and exhibits the same deficiencies as those mentioned above. Many agnostics leave the integration of nature and reason as a mystery not to be accounted for at all. They neither accept nor reject the idea of a source of this integration, and consequently do not call it God. Most theists, on the other hand, without subtracting from the mystery, account for the integration of nature with intellect by an explanatory factor they call God. Schools of thought that disregard the mystery of the person would not need any explanatory factor for it, with the result that they are unable to account for the integration of nature and reason in the person, or for the physical existence of the person as personal.

Society not only accounts for the effectuation of the systematic and purposeful training of all natural abilities, it is itself the purpose for the sake of which this training takes place and makes sense. Community makes demands on all dimensions of the human person (natural, rational and spiritual) by means of reward and punishment. If I did not identify with others and with my role in the community, I would not be able to synthesise my abilities or to know who I am. Individualistic tendencies disregard this explanatory factor, with the consequence that they are unable to account for the *telos* of the person.

All the aforementioned explanatory factors are essential to the formation of personal identity. At different times we may, however, rely on different factors in varying degrees. The essential connections between the types of explanation mean that none of them taken on its own can be a sufficient condition for personal identity, and consequently not for human dignity either. Matter and form are opposite principles that crave one another in order to be; they are joined by the efficient cause, and they are so for the sake of the end.

It is only when I identify with what lies beneath or supports my nature, my reason and my social integration, i.e. with my very existence as *who* I am, that I open up the depths of the person. Only from this depth can I identify the fundamental value of the other human being, as the value of his or her existence beyond, but not in independence of, his or her nature, god-likeness, reason and social integration. We call the pure appreciation of the individuality of the other self, love. Love sees potential everywhere, even where great effort is needed to bring it to fulfilment. It also bears disappointment and understands, where only rudiments of meaning seem to exist. It advocates the rights of the weak, the young and the old, and it protects them against abuses by stronger parties and interests. Against this background it is not so

strange that it is only in love that we adequately identify the other, and therefore not so strange either that we should have to rely on it in practice in order to give content to the idea of human dignity. What we say when we claim that the principle of human dignity *is* the basis of the international world order, is that this world order *should be* a civilisation of respect and love. Perhaps we even mean that it is only as such a civilisation that it can be a civilisation at all.

7. Conclusion

The experience of human dignity underlies the idea and principle of human dignity. The idea was, however, thought of as relying upon different aspects of the human being: on its nature; on relativity to God; on reason; or on social integration. The differing accounts were identified and analysed in different historically-based frameworks (the cosmo-centric, the Christo-centric, the logo-centric and the polis-centred frameworks), which exemplify various possible ways of justifying human dignity. Whereas the explanatory factors of the various frameworks indicate the essentially human, none of them taken in isolation provides us with a sufficient condition for human dignity. As indicators of the human they point towards the *being* whose existence is of fundamental value.

The definition underlying the accounts embodied in the various frameworks is merely formal. It is that human dignity is the fundamental value of the human being. For the content of the idea of human dignity we must, however, turn to the experiences of love and friendship, in which the constitution of the person enjoys the most favourable conditions. Here we learn to respond out of our own depth to the equally fundamental value of the other. Hence, as an expression, 'human dignity', refers beyond criteria to the fundamental value of the existence of individual human beings.[24]

---

[1] The use of the word 'human', to designate what pertains to the human race, apparently also is of relatively recent date. Various etymological dictionaries affirm that the word was in use only from the seventeenth century onwards. Before then the term 'humane' was used, with a more normative sense. The expression 'human dignity' occurs, and human dignity is a prominent theme, in the papal encyclicals from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.

[2] The idea of a time-typical framework is inspired by the concept of 'moral frameworks' developed by Taylor, Charles: *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989). The presuppositions or conventions of the framework can be classified as ethical, political and metaphysical. Ethical conventions involve virtue, status, rights and duty; political conventions involve the nature of law and society; and metaphysical conventions concern the place and destiny of the human being in relation to nature and the divine. This classification lies beneath the developments in 6.

[3] 1123a18.

[4] Translation by Walter Miller, taken from the Loeb edition.

[5] *De Inventione,* II, 166.

[6] Ibid. 159.

[7] *De Legibus* I, VII, 22.

[8] *De Re Publica* I, XXVII, 43.

[9] *De Officiis*, I, 106.

[10] *Patrologia Latina* 17, 1106/ 40, 1213 – 4/ 100, 565 – 8. See also: *Clavis Patristica Pseudegraphicum Medii Aevii* IIB, *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina, (Turnholt: Brepols, 1990 – 94), p. 683, no. 3008 and Marenbon, John: From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), p. 30 – 43 and 144 – 163.

[11] Albertus Magnus: *ST*, Tractatus 10, q. 44, 2; cf. Bonaventura: *In Sent*. 1. Dist, XXV, 1.

[12] Thomas Aquinas: *ST* IaIIae 29,3.

[13] Ibid. IIaIIae 64,2.

[14] Ibid. IIaIIae, 102, 1-3.

[15] This work, whose title was chosen by the publishers, does not use the expressions 'dignity of man' or 'human dignity'. The idea that dignity consists in the freedom to chose one's manner of existence, and that this is characteristic of man, is however perfectly attributable to Pico, due to a Platonic idea forcefully revived during the Renaissance.

[16] Hobbes, Thomas: *Leviathan*, 10.

[17] Including the *Grundlegung,* the *Rechtslehre* and the *Tugendlehre.*

[18] *Tugendlehre* 42.

[19] *Grundlegung* AK 4:436.

[20] Ibid. AK 4:439.

[21] *Rechtslehre* 38.

[22] Ibid. 46.

[23] *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

[24] A former version of this article was printed in Vial Correa and Sgreccia (eds.): *La cultura della vita: Fondamenti e dimensioni,* Supplemento al volume degli Atti della VII Assemblea Generale 1-4 marzo 2001 (Città de Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002) pp. 87-101, under the title: 'Towards a Definition of Human Dignity'.