

IVR Special Workshop “Dignity’s Antagonists” (SW 88)

11 July 2019, all-day

Organisers: Christine Bratu (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) & Kristina Lepold (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main)

Abstract: In recent years, there has been much philosophical debate about how to understand the concept of (especially human) dignity. In contrast, much less work has been done on the question of what it means if dignity is denied. If we accept the basic tenet of non-ideal theorizing – i.e. that to fully understand a normative ideal we also have to examine how it can be subverted – this theoretical lacuna is worrisome. So how are we to understand concepts such as disrespect, humiliation, subordination or dehumanization – to name only a few of the concepts which have been proposed as dignity’s antagonists? Furthermore, are these all synonyms referring to the same practices, do they denote different ways the same moral wrong can be realized or are they not interrelated at all? What could be considered paradigmatic cases of each of these wrongs? And which concepts should we employ for discussing which legal, political or social issues or are they all equally fruitful? This workshop aims at shedding some light on the current conceptual thicket. To do so, we bring together scholars from different philosophical fields such as social philosophy, moral and political philosophy and feminist philosophy.

PROGRAMME

9.45–10.30 am	Regina Schidel (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main)	“Human Dignity as Moral Status – A Relational Interpretation”
10.30–11 am	<i>Coffee Break</i>	
11–11.45 am	Peter Schaber (Universität Zürich)	“Degrading Treatment”
12–12.45 am	Christine Bratu (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)	“Disrespect and Violations of Human Dignity”
12.45 am–2 pm	<i>Lunch Break</i>	
2–2.45 pm	Eva Weber-Guskar (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)	“Violations of Human Dignity explained by the Attitude-Account of Human Dignity”
3–3.45 pm	Kristina Lepold (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main)	“Disrespect and Struggles for Recognition in Honneth’s Theory of Recognition”
3.45–4.30 pm	<i>Coffee Break</i>	
4.30–5.15 pm	Deborah Mühlebach (Universität Basel)	“Why Do Dignity-Depriving Social Structures Matter?”
5.30–6.15 pm	Christian Neuhäuser (Technische Universität Dortmund)	“Dignity and Contempt”

ABSTRACTS OF INDIVIDUAL TALKS (in the order in which they appear on the programme)

Regina Schidel (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main): “Human Dignity as Moral Status – A Relational Interpretation”

The concept of human dignity is recently exposed to massive criticism. Achim Lohmar argues in his latest book (2017) that the notion of human dignity is a defective one, since no human trait fulfills the conditions of 1. being specifically human, 2. being possessed by all human beings and 3. being a moral status conferring property. Yet his scepticism proves only to be appropriate if dignity is conceived of as supervening on a property or range of properties. In contrast to such a metaphysical realism, I will argue for an alternative understanding of human dignity as moral status. The proposed justification will take Kant’s conception of dignity as a starting point; however, it will transcend his understanding in a productive sense. Central to Kant’s moral philosophy is the idea of an imperative moral commitment towards oneself and the other human being. I will propose a relational reconstruction of Kant’s deontological notion of dignity, drawing on Stephen Darwall’s second-personal account of morality: according to my reconstruction dignity as normative status is not dependent on individual rational properties, but is constituted through intersubjective relations of respect. This relational conception of dignity accounts for its social nature, while at the same time addressing its deontological character of justification.

Peter Schaber (Universität Zürich): “Degrading Treatment”

Drawing on Jeremy Waldron’s proposal that a good account of dignity should come up with an account of the importance of degrading treatment, I will argue that degrading treatment is a paradigm form of disrespecting someone’s dignity. However, it is not clear what degrading treatment is. In my talk I will suggest that degrading another person can be understood by appeal to the moral status of persons. The main idea is that those acts are degrading that treat others as if their moral claims were less important than one’s own. The most extreme form of degradation is to treat others as if they had no moral claims against others. Less extreme forms of degrading treatment amount to taking the claims others have as less important.

Christine Bratu (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München): “Disrespect and Violations of Human Dignity”

In my talk, I want to address a problem for the so called status account of human dignity. According to those who advocate for this account, human dignity consists in a specific set of moral entitlements and liberties, most commonly assumed to be our fundamental human rights. While on this account it is easy to make sense of the idea that human dignity cannot be violated (as we can neither lose the property of being human nor the status this entails), it has proven difficult to explain why, at least intuitively speaking, not every infringement of our human rights amounts to a dignity violation. I claim that proponents of the status account of human dignity should use the concept of disrespect to tackle this problem. On my account of disrespect as libel, an action counts as disrespectful insofar it explicitly or implicitly states that the target does not have the full set of fundamental human rights. I argue that only some infringements of human rights are disrespectful in this sense and that only those that are also amount to dignity violations. By distinguishing between those human rights infringement that are disrespectful and those that are not, we can capture our intuitions concerning the relation between human rights infringements and violations of human dignity.

Eva Weber-Guskar (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): “Violations of Human Dignity explained by the Attitude-Account of Human Dignity”

In the philosophical discussion about human dignity, three main concepts of dignity are currently in use: dignity is considered either as a value, as a status, or as an attitude. The first two accounts both conceive of dignity as something absolute and inherent that cannot be lost whereas the third one conceives of dignity as something that is contingent. Accounts of dignity as value or status are still more prominent than accounts of dignity as an attitude. In my paper I want to show the advantages of some version of the third account. I will argue that this kind of account is especially apt to grasp the ways we are speaking of violations of human dignity, ways human dignity is denied. We must recognize that we do legitimately talk about a “life of dignity” or “living with dignity” etc.; and we should accept that it is conceptually possible, and unfortunately sometimes also a fact, that a person may live a life with damaged dignity, with a lesser degree of dignity, or even without dignity at all. But dignity in this sense can – at least in many cases – be restored and regained. More precisely I will put forward an account that presents dignity an attitude in the sense of a relation a person holds to herself that is also dependent on and relevant for her relation to other persons.

Kristina Lepold (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main): “Disrespect and Struggles for Recognition in Honneth’s Theory of Recognition”

In my talk, I want to examine disrespect as key antagonist of dignity with a focus on the consequences of disrespect on individual persons. More specifically, I wish to engage with the notion of disrespect that can be found in the work of Axel Honneth and challenge Honneth’s idea that experiences of disrespect will give rise to struggles for recognition. In the first part of the talk, I will reconstruct Honneth’s understanding of recognition: seeking inspiration from Kant and his formula that “respect is the representation of a worth that infringes upon my self-love”, Honneth conceives of recognition as a relation between two persons in which person A responds to a value of person B by ascribing a normative status to B which finds expression in A’s actions towards B. In the second part of the talk, I turn to the two kinds of cases of misrecognition that one can distinguish on the basis of this understanding of recognition: in the first kind of case, A does not perceive a value in B and therefore does not commit to treating B in an appropriate way; in the second kind of case, A is committed to treating B in accordance with B’s value, but for some reason fails to do so. In the third part of my talk, I will critically probe Honneth’s thesis that experiences of disrespect will always lead to struggles for recognition. Against the backdrop of Honneth’s own understanding of disrespect and its consequences for individual persons, I will discuss various reasons why experiences of disrespect may not lead to resistance, but to withdrawal or even an adaptation of one’s own normative expectations.

Deborah Mühlebach (Universität Basel): “Why Do Dignity-Depriving Social Structures Matter?”

Philosophers of language increasingly engage with issues concerning politically or morally significant language such as the meaning of slurring or derogatory terms. However, if the goal is to illuminate the phenomenon of politically and morally significant linguistic meaning with tools provided by philosophy of language, then many currently available theories of derogatory terms only achieve it in very limited ways. By taking issue with a broad range of positions in this debate, this paper aims to first show that structural derogation is at the core of morally and politically significant language use. Secondly, I argue that focusing on structural derogation has several methodological consequences for the study of

problematic language use. I end by drawing a parallel between the case of verbal derogation and phenomena like disrespect, humiliation, subordination or dehumanization which have been considered to be the negative counterparts to dignity by some. I argue that an account of dignity or of any of the aforementioned negative counterparts needs to be clear about whether it treats its object of investigation at least partially as a structural problem and if so, adapt its methodology accordingly.

Christian Neuhäuser (Technische Universität Dortmund): “Dignity and Contempt”

Contempt or at least certain forms of contempt can be seen as a violation of dignity. The expression of contempt normally communicates that a person does not deserve the same respect as other persons. For instance, rituals of humiliation are expressions of strong contempt. It seems to be clear that from a moral point of view such forms of contempt are forbidden. However, at the same time we sometimes believe that it is permitted or even obligatory to express contempt. When someone acts in a sexist or racist way it might not be sufficient to state disagreement, it might be appropriate instead to show contempt. One reason for why this is so, seems to be that contempt can function as an expression of solidarity with discriminated persons. The resulting problem, to be discussed in my talk, is that it seems to be problematic that contempt is a violation of dignity and at the same time permitted or even demanded. I will distinguish between the dignity of a person and the dignity of a personality and argue that it can be permitted to violate personal dignity, but never to violate personhood dignity.