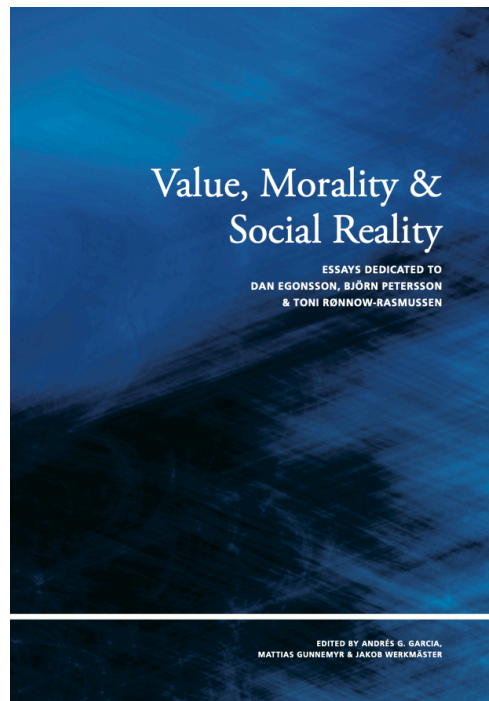


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Lena Halldenius

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Introduction

Let me take the liberty of opening this essay with a personal reflection and an anecdote. I came to philosophy having just finished my law degree. Uncertain of what to do now – all I knew was that I did not want to be a practicing lawyer – I took a course in moral philosophy out of a vague notion that it would be more intellectually stimulating than my law studies had been. And it was. But it was also frustrating in a way that prompted me to laboriously forge my own way through it.

I had chosen law because I was interested in social and political issues. My incentive to study philosophy was the same and has remained so. My philosophical starting point was and is the fact that we live together in political societies, that societies differ, change over time, and are always non-ideal. Norms we subscribe to or fight over and to what we ascribe value cannot be understood in isolation from this fact. At any rate, I am not interested in trying to understand such things in isolation from this fact. For me, there is no distinction to be made between philosophy and politics. Philosophy and philosophers are part of the messy social world we live in. We can only do our best to try and understand it and, particularly if you do moral or political philosophy, what the problems are in the ways we live in societies and how we can make them better. Philosophy is not its own precinct. It gives us tools and methods, not a licence to discount knowledge and experiences that are not philosophical, or that are philosophical only not produced by philosophers but by historians, disability scholars, feminist activists, or even lawyers. If you think I am selling philosophy short, that's fine. We do not need to agree on this.

How to do philosophy while still being deeply committed politically took me some time to figure out, and it started already at that first moral philosophy course. I first felt that I was expected to leave everything behind, that nothing I already knew mattered. We read the history of ethics, not as in thinking about ethical

questions in different historical circumstances but as a parade of men, selected – as the preface to the textbook put it – for their “greatness”. I was puzzled. It seemed to me that these philosophers from the past were quite legitimately addressing ethical questions emanating out of their own times, challenges faced by their own societies, but that was not supposed to matter. What makes the great men great? Needless to say, there were no women in the parade. There were no women philosophers at all on any reading list, but plenty of great men declaring that women are intellectually less able than men. We were, in effect, taught that women make bad philosophers. One woman thinker, however, turned out to be indirectly present, which brings me to my anecdote.

We were reading J. S. Mill’s *On Liberty*, a text written very much from within a political experience, and I loved it. The lecturer drew our attention to Mill’s opening dedication, in which he laments the loss of his intellectual companion and wife, acknowledging her co-authorship of this work as well as all others written since they started working together. Our lecturer was apologetic, saying that he usually did not mention personal details of a philosopher’s life (why not? I thought), but that Harriet Taylor Mill’s contribution begged to be noted since it had been suppressed, both at the time and after, even though Mill himself recognized it. That lecturer was Dan Egonsson. Without knowing it, he got me thinking about how politically fraught and precarious the writing and publishing of philosophy have always been, and about that undercurrent of voices that are trivialized, ignored, or actively written out of the collective well of philosophical thought.

The voices that are not considered great, are they discounted because of their views or because of their perceived lack of fitness for philosophical thought? The intellectual capacities deemed required for philosophy – reason, intellectual autonomy and discipline, imagination, and judgement – were the same capacities that supposedly set humanity apart from the rest of the sentient world, the capacities that ground the moral dignity of man, but also the same capacities that women, according to most of the great men we read, do not possess. Given the incurable “inferiority and infirmities” of women and the natural “sovereignty of the male”¹, are women human?

Against this background, I will now go on to consider the philosophical construction of the dignity of the human and then to a critical but hopefully constructive engagement with Dan Egonsson’s reflections on social attitudes about the dignity of humanity and how and why moral philosophers ought to account for them. I agree that philosophers should account for actual social attitudes, but my discussion will tend towards the conclusion that “accounting for” should be a consciously political and critical exercise, lest philosophers risk reproducing prejudice and bias.

¹ David Hume, quoted in Battersby, 1981.

History, Rights, and the Dignity of “Man”

History – including philosophical history – is contested terrain; it is also inevitably a construction. As E. H. Carr famously said in *What is History?* in 1961, “facts speak only when the historian calls on them”. What becomes a *historical* fact rather than just stuff that happened is constructed in the process of writing history – also philosophical history. Carr’s point is that which facts, ideas, or voices that are given the floor in the writing of history – also philosophical history – is a decision, not a discovery. And it’s a decision that will be shaped by whatever it is that the historian – or philosopher – wants to show and finds to be significant and worthy of attention.

Harriet Taylor Mill’s role in writing *On Liberty* is still debated and the works she co-wrote are still reissued under J. S. Mill’s name alone.² Why? Because acknowledging her contribution would diminish his greatness? But if we know that a text about political liberty is co-written by someone whose person in the eyes of the law was “suspended” during marriage, “incorporated” into the person of her husband (Blackstone, 1765, 442), does that not add a certain urgency to the philosophy? It seemed to me that philosophy written by those who do not fit the bill of greatness – not then and not now – is a kind of performative act, an acting out of intellectual liberty denied, a claiming of rights not recognized, also against the philosophy of the great who, with few exceptions, have had quite a lot to say about the intellectual and moral inferiority of women and people of colour. We were not taught those bits, but this is a struggle worthy of our attention.

When I started studying early-modern philosophy properly – particularly Mary Wollstonecraft – it was even clearer to me that this is a struggle not only over who is included in the philosophical canon but over humanity itself. True to the Enlightenment project, Wollstonecraft says in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* that capacity for reason and moral improvement puts us above “brute creation” (Wollstonecraft 1995 [1790], 33), with “us” meaning us humans. Her feminist project is to analyse and disclose the denial to women of exactly those capacities that the philosophy to which she subscribes regards as distinctive of human nature. Generally accepted norms – that women are formed by nature to be “domestic brutes” as she put it in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1995 [1792], 88) and thought to be the rightful property of men (Wollstonecraft, 2009 [1798], 109) – were validated by the philosophy of the great. How do you write yourself into an intellectual world where contingent political hierarchies and widely accepted moral attitudes are elevated to the natural order of things and the analytical categories designed to exclude you?

In *The Politics of the Human* (2015), Anne Phillips notes that the language of the human is ostensibly one of inclusion, yet any definition of the human serves to exclude, and will inevitably be a matter of history and politics rather than objective

² On the controversy over Harriet Taylor Mill’s co-authorship of *On Liberty*, see McCabe, 2021, 252-254.

observation. Any distinction found to be crucial will be contingent upon attitudes that could have – should have? – been different but which, once established, shape the way we think and what we take for granted.

Some evidence suggests that the idea that there is something particularly morally noble or dignified about being human *per se*, rather than being noble among the human, is a product of Renaissance humanism (Phillips, 2015, 23). This alleged nobility of being “human” seems always to have been tied to moral and intellectual capacities ostensibly associated with humanity while leaving a crack open for the question if all humans are human in that sense. The one category whose human dignity has never been in doubt in the minds of the great, is white men of independent means. When Wollstonecraft writes in 1792, in the preface to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that she pleads for her sex, not for herself, she means that she pleads for the humanity of women, for their equal status as moral subjects and equal capacity for virtue. The struggle was over humanity, since the human rights men claimed for themselves as humans were founded on those same mental capacities that women were denied. “Woman” thus turns into a mongrel concept: a human being but somehow less so, more brutish. Immanuel Kant famously left women “in an unresolved middle position” between moral agent and thing (Halldenius, 2011), “an anomalous kind of human being whose moral predisposition never fully develops” (Kleingeld, 1999, 64). Deliberations over who qualifies into the moral domain of the human is a philosophical staple in the works of the great. There is in that sense a direct line between Kant in the late 18th century and James Griffin, who in 2008 relegates “mental defectives” to the margins of rights bearing humanity (2008, 44).

Since I work in the field of human rights philosophy – both of today and its early-modern incarnations – I have had ample reason to grapple with the political implications of the association between “human” and certain mental capacities as foundation for subjectivity and rights. Humans have rights “simply in virtue of their humanity”, as the saying goes (Cruft & Liao, 2015, 4f), but that “humanity” is morally loaded.

Philosophers working on the concept of human rights rather than related value concepts, like freedom or justice, are more prone to invoking historical precedence for their own ideas. It is not obvious what it is about human rights that prompts history to make itself felt in this way; I just note that historical precedence is made to serve in argument for various understandings of human rights in a way that has to do more with the “human” than with the “rights”. James Griffin is an example of this. He claims that “our” concept of human rights (that is, the concept he himself favours and defends) is a product of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy (2008) and has not changed since then. It is ours through inheritance. I have critically analysed Griffin’s account of human rights elsewhere (Halldenius 2016). Here I merely let him be an example of the claim that there is in history an account to be observed or discovered – *our* account no less – about the moral rights-bearing status of the human such that “human rights” refers to whatever claimable political

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and social arrangement this particular account of the moral human validates. According to Griffin, the historically received moral status of the human is the human person's capacity to form and pursue a worthwhile life – normative agency – and this is what grounds human dignity and rights. “Human rights” is the name we give to the requisite set of protections of this human capacity (Griffin 2008, 13), which seems simultaneously to be a feature of humanity as such and a practical skill that some humans have while some do not. This means that even though human rights are held “simply in virtue of being human”, some humans have no human rights. Is this the philosophy of human rights handed down to us by the Enlightenment tradition, Wollstonecraft's tradition?

Remember Carr: “facts speak only when the historian calls on them”. Selectively putting history to use in service to one's own preferred conception about morality, the message is sold as if it could not be in any other way. When Griffin claims historical precedence for a particular account of personal dignity by drawing a line from ancient natural law to “us”, he skirts several alternative sets of historical facts.³ In Rome “dignitas” referred to a man's social distinction and power, for a Medieval thinker dignity is a kind of intellectual nobility, a striving for glory through truth (Robiglio, 2006), while for Enlightenment radical philosophers, like Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine, dignity marked the pride of someone who is just and virtuous but also independent of arbitrary and unaccountable political rule.⁴

It is certainly true that in early-modern accounts of natural rights from John Locke to Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft it is as given that the capacity for reason distinguishes the rights-bearing subject. It is precisely because of this that these moral capacities associated with humanity feature so prominently in early-modern debates about equality. But if reason is intrinsic to human nature, reason can never legitimately serve in arguments to privilege some humans over others, be it men over women, or great men over “idiots”.⁵ As Wollstonecraft puts it: “Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?” (1995 [1792], 69). It is a rhetorical question and a political challenge rolled into one. If

³ Griffin's claim is that the human person's moral capacity to form and pursue a worthwhile life has grounded dignity and rights since “Greek and Roman antiquity” (9), via Medieval theological accounts of man's innate disposition to reason (176), to early-modern secular ideas of natural rights and the Rights of Man. Since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there ‘has been no theoretical development of the idea itself’ (13).

⁴ Here is Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*, attacking Sir John Dalrymple: “he who can calmly hear and digest such doctrine [American obligation to the King of England], hath forfeited his claim to rationality—an apostate from the order of manhood—and ought to be considered as one who hath not only given up the proper dignity of man, but sunk himself beneath the rank of animals, and contemptibly crawls through the world like a worm.” (Paine, 1776).

⁵ See Simon Jarrett's fascinating historical analysis of the idea of the disabled mind, and how a largely tolerant social inclusion of “idiots” was replaced over the course of the nineteenth century, and as the medical professions claims to “expertise” grew, by loathing, contempt, and isolation from society (Jarrett, 2020).

reason is the moral mark of humanity, then it should be a foregone conclusion that women have the same moral standing as men. Given that women instead were not granted the same moral standing as men – and were denied political rights on that same ground – there were only two possible logical conclusions: either women are subjected to illegitimate oppression by having their natural and equal rights denied, or women are not human. Which is it? That question still resonates in human rights theory and moral philosophy alike.

For Griffin, “humanity” is a shorthand for the “dignity of the human person”. Personhood or normative agency is what grounds rights (Griffin 2008, 152). Jeremy Waldron prefers to think of dignity as a status rather than a value-concept but this status is a normative one, a moral rank or bearing that does not ground rights exactly, but rather instantiates them (Waldron 2015, 2012). The dignified humanity is a kind of moral aristocracy with only one (high) rank, or a caste society with only one (high) caste (2015, 34). If there is a standard attitude in human rights philosophy, it includes a variation of the twin idea that human beings have rights by virtue of their humanity, where “humanity” is this moral construction.

As these reflections indicate, the moral standing of the human has political and legal implications way outside the bounds of moral philosophy. If having or not having human rights is predicated on having or not having – or being believed to have or not have – certain mental capacities, then we are inevitably faced with an uncomfortable challenge. Those people whose rights bearing capacity – and by implication their political and legal status – is placed in doubt in these discussions are invariably people whose lives in society are already disproportionately vulnerable to risk, poverty, discrimination, and prejudice, and who are in disproportionate need of the protection and security provided by democratic and social institutions. For most philosophers, the very notion of human rights seems to bring with it, or imply, or be premised upon a certain moral *je ne sais quoi* of the human. So what is it?

A Discussion of Egonsson’s *Standard Attitude to Human Dignity*

In his book *Dimensions of Dignity. The Moral Importance of Being Human* (1998), Dan Egonsson proceeds from the intuition that there is “something morally special about being human” (1998, 54) or, in the words of Roger Wertheimer: “being human has *moral cachet*” (quoted in Egonsson 1998, 33). In the remainder of this essay, I will reflect on this “something morally special” – human dignity – with Egonsson as my starting and focal point. I will end up being partially critical of Egonsson’s account, but I wish to stress my appreciation of his reflective, meandering way of going about it, inviting discussion rather than closing it down through assertiveness.

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The main question for a moral philosopher, one might think, is whether it is morally justified to give precedence to humans and, if so, on what grounds, but Dan Egonsson wants us first to consider what attitudes people actually hold. He proceeds from what he refers to as the Standard Attitude (SA) to human dignity, which includes the intuition I just mentioned, that there is “something morally special about being human” (Egonsson 1998, 54). Egonsson believes this attitude to be widely shared and that moral philosophers should take it into account precisely for that reason.

The Standard Attitude, then, is not a normative principle; it does not dictate what we should or should not do and one is not blameworthy for not sharing it. It is an observation (I will return to the empirical soundness of it) informing the hypothesis that most people – not only philosophers – do think that there is something morally special about being human and that this status justifies giving priority to humans over non-human animals. The further claim is that the attitude held by people is that being human *per se* has this moral quality; it is part of what it is to be a human being, intrinsic to the human species (Ibid., 127). We will have reason to return to that as well.

Egonsson’s SA is partly inferred from behaviour: the claim is that people tend to act as if they make a moral distinction between humans and non-human animals even if, when asked, they might not readily accept the distinction. Unpacking SA, we find that it features *centrally* in our minds (in the sense that it affects many of our moral opinions), that it entails regarding human beings as *inviolable* (once they exist), as *irreplaceable* (one human cannot be swapped for another without moral loss), and as *equal* in the fundamental sense that whatever value one gives to human life is given to all humans (Ibid., 91-103).

This looks like a package deal, but Egonsson quickly dismisses equality as an integral aspect of SA, for the reason that it does not seem to tally with behaviour after all: “In what sense can we be said to live as if we believe that all human beings are *equally valuable*?” (Ibid., 103, my emphasis). Fair question, but let’s pause here for a bit. Egonsson emphasizes early on that SA in the “Western tradition” is derived from Christianity rather than Aristotle (Ibid., 4) and that it importantly cuts two ways: human beings are more valuable than non-human animals *and* no human being is more valuable than another human being. The prince and the slave are equally created in the image of God, as it were.

So, SA is supposed to be an attitude not only about human beings compared to non-human beings, but human beings compared to each other. The aspects of SA mentioned above – inviolability, irreplaceability, and equality – stand in different relations to these two comparisons. Inviolability and irreplaceability indicate a difference between our attitudes to humans compared to non-human animals. Animals are typically not inviolable to us, at least not if they are categorized as food, vermin, or a nuisance to human interests. Animals can be inviolable for religious reasons (like the sacred status of cows in Hinduism) or for reasons of conservation (like endangered species which, ironically, are endangered because of what humans have done to their habitat) but, and in tension with the main message of SA, animals

can take on the standing of both inviolability *and* irreplaceability in the minds of human beings. The personal bond between a dog or cat and its owner can have an emotional quality indistinguishable from relationships between humans. This should be familiar to us.

In a moving essay about grief, the author V. S. Naipaul writes about the death of his father, brother, and cat Augustus. He also writes about his sister's cat, who was killed by wild dogs. "Grief for that particular cat, whose ways she knew so well, almost like the ways of a person, never left her." (Naipaul, 2020). Naipaul's sister was not grieving for *a* cat but for that particular individual cat, who was indeed irreplaceable to her, as Augustus also came to be for Naipaul. But there remains a difference of some importance, I think. The moral status of the beloved dog or cat does not generalize to the category of dogs or cats. The fact that some dogs are loved just like children or friends, does not seem to impart inviolability or irreplaceability on the stray dog that no one cares about. We might be ready to impart inviolability and irreplaceability on particular animals but not on all, and not equality of standing between them. This is a further reason for supposing that the specificity of SA as something separating humans from non-humans needs the criterion of equality in order to not collapse.

Equality is the one aspect of SA that refers directly to the comparison *between* humans. If we dismiss equality as integral to SA, then SA does no longer cut in the double way that Egonsson claims for it. I agree that people in general do not live as if they believe that all human beings are *equally valuable* but SA, as I understand it, does not require that we regard all human beings as equally valuable, only that we regard them as *equally human* in the fundamental sense that all humans have dignity, or are above the threshold of dignity, or however we'd like to put it. Equality here refers to being equally reckoned among beings with dignity and is, it seems to me, indispensable for SA. If SA is supposed to be an attitude about the moral worth of being human *per se* then it is incompatible with allowing that some human beings are less (valuable as) human than others.

I suspect there is something else lurking here: the attitude that humans have a "moral cachet" that non-humans do not have is perhaps more consistent and stable than the attitude that all humans are equally valuable as humans. As the slaves of this world have continually pointed out (often at high cost to themselves), the abstract doctrine that all humans are equal in human dignity has never tallied very well with actual human behaviour nor with how societies have actually functioned, but the same can be said of the other aspects of SA. There is scant reason to find "equality" to be more of a behavioural outlier than, say, inviolability. Are we really comfortable in concluding that humans on the whole act as if they believe that all human beings (once they exist) are inviolable? To exemplify: the backlash against abortion rights in the United States – exemplified by the threat to the legal precedence of *Roe v. Wade* – while children being gunned down in schools are treated as an acceptable cost for keeping up the right to carry assault weapons indicates substantial support for the attitude that human beings are inviolable only *before* they exist.

If we as philosophers want to account for generally held attitudes in our normative theorising, then the question arises what counts as evidence of a generally held attitude. Philosophers' own intuitions are probably a poor guide. Another challenge is that there very likely is a disconnect between attitudes that people express when they are explicitly asked for them, say in questionnaires, and actual behaviour, particularly in social and political situations where there is peer pressure, prejudice, and conflicting interests. If SA is to be inferred from behaviour, then what is relevant behaviour and how do we know? Here is an example.

As we have seen, Egonsson dismisses equality as an integral aspect of SA because it does not fit with how we live. I have claimed that if equality is not part of SA, then SA is no longer an attitude regarding the value of being human *per se* and cannot serve in intra-human comparisons. But dismissing equality also jars against Egonsson's own defence of SA against a "serious objection" (1998, 86f). The objection is this: let's accept that philosophers should account for SA in their moral theory, on the ground that SA is widely accepted.⁶ But on the same argument, should philosophers not also account for other attitudes and preferences that are less palatable, like racist and sexist attitudes? If most people prefer humans to non-human animals, but also prefer some humans (say male, able-bodied, and white humans) to others, then why should moral philosophers account for the first and not the second?

Egonsson does not think there is need to worry, mainly because "we have to remember that nowadays there is an almost world-wide and strong opinion against racism" (1998, 87). There are two problems with this, though. First, if this faith in the unbiased attitudes of people in general really were true, it would dismantle Egonsson's argument for dismissing equality as part of SA, since it would then indeed be the case that "all human beings are equally valuable", at least in terms of race. But, and second, there is no evidence for believing that it is true, at least not if we are to infer attitudes from behaviour. The state of our world – migration policies that favour white and rich over black and poor, misogynist violence against women, the fact that people of colour are poorer and their political liberties more precarious – suggests that we have to remember the exact opposite.

There is no stability to be had for SA if it is supposed to be inferred from actual behaviour. Alternatives are that SA can be inferred from doctrinal beliefs (the association to the Christian tradition suggests as much) or from beliefs that people report when they are explicitly asked to report them, like in questionnaires or controlled psychological studies. So let's look at that, in a roundabout kind of way, remembering that SA is the combined attitude that human life has more value than non-human life and that no human life is more valuable – as human life – than another.

⁶ "Account for" will manifest differently depending on one's moral philosophy. For a Kantian, accounting for SA could be to use it in support of a deontological principle that it is always right in itself to favour humans over non-humans. For a utilitarian, the argument could be that not accounting for SA in moral theory would harm people's preference for it.

Dignity and Personalism

In SA “human beings” refers to biological human life (Egonsson 1998, 34): being a human life *per se* has moral cachet. But in real life it is not easy to disentangle attitudes towards the value of something from attitudes towards the value of things that are customarily associated with it. Is it the property of being biologically human that endows a being with dignity, or characteristics typically associated with human life, like such intellectual and emotional capacities of reason and self-awareness that feature in conceptions of human personhood? Egonsson discusses moral theories that attribute dignity to human life indirectly, via various capacities or religiously motivated notions about the human spirit or soul. He hypothesizes that a belief that being human has dignity in itself can be a shorthand, whereby people come to associate the value of a property of a thing with the thing itself (35). That is indeed quite possible, but it is not obvious how it affects SA. SA is not a moral principle; it is a claim about moral attitudes held by “most people” combined with an argument that moral philosophers should account for widely held attitudes simply because they are widely held, not because they are widely held *and* correct. SA is the attitude that human life has dignity *per se*, regardless of what reasons (mistaken or not), if any, that people have for holding it (if they hold it). SA presumably is agnostic regarding what the *per se* refers to: either the bareness of biological human life or certain morally relevant capacities or properties regarded as intrinsic to human life. In the first case, the moral valuation of human life is extrinsic to it, or ascribed to it, for reasons that could be anything. In the second case, the moral valuation is intrinsic; the moral value of human life is, as it were, found in it. There is something peculiar here that warrants a quick dip into the cultural history of moral attitudes.

Egonsson explicitly links SA to “the West”, and the West to a largely Christian cultural and moral sphere. The influence of Christianity on our notions of morality in “the West” is certainly undeniable – even for committed atheists – and this holds particularly regarding the dignity of the human. But in the Christian moral-cultural-religious context, human dignity is very much a matter of personhood, not species membership. I venture to say that one theistic notion that has shaped philosophical thinking in the West more than most others is personalism.⁷ Personalism in its modern form expresses a form of human exceptionalism: a binary distinction, not a gradual one, between humans and non-humans. Humans have higher value than other beings, not only in their own estimation but *tout court*. Only humans have full subjectivity, only humans are *someone* rather than *something*. This worth, standing, or subjectivity – call it dignity – is to do with man’s capacity for reason, self-awareness, and self-determination. Importantly, in classical personalism these dignity-inducing capacities are not characteristics that are checked one individual at

⁷ On “personalism” in philosophy, see Williams and Bengtsson, 2022. On the influence of personalism on human rights doctrines in the 20th century, see Lindkvist 2017, and Moyn 2015.

the time or inferred from what actual individuals are like; they are believed to be inherent to human nature. They are an aspect of the metaphysics of humanity, not skills or functions that some human individuals have while others do not. In other words, all human beings have dignity because all human beings are, by virtue of their intrinsic nature, persons. This is the second case referred to: the moral value of human life is *found* in it. All humans are inviolable and irreplaceable by virtue of their personhood, while individuated objects and non-persons are not. (Needless to say, this theist belief in the equal dignity of all humans has always clashed rather brutally with the realities of the world and continues to do so. This harks back to my hunch that the dignity of the human is inferred from doctrinal belief rather than behaviour.)

In modern secular moral thinking, this metaphysical idea has been half-heartedly discarded, and a distinction introduced between human being and human person, such that personhood is treated as an added extra on top of being human. Personhood is now a practical skillset that most but not all individuated human beings develop (remember Griffin's "mental defectives"), and which can be lost again, for example through dementia. On this position, all persons are human beings, but not all human beings are persons. Personhood becomes an empirical question, thus generating debates over the moral standing of specific groups of people, like babies and people with severe cognitive disabilities. (I acknowledge but will not go into the ongoing discussions about non-human animals having personhood by virtue of their cognitive capacities.) One point worth emphasizing is that it is only on this latter position that it makes sense to distinguish between attributing dignity directly or indirectly. On the personalist position, making the distinction is the mistake.

It is hard to deny that the moral notion that human dignity is grounded in personhood is thoroughly dispersed in Western Christian and secular culture. To the extent that SA insists that the moral standing of dignity – the inviolability, irreplaceability, and equality of human individuals – is tied to biological human existence, rather than to attribution of personhood to that existence, it looks rather queer in this context and cannot be inferred from doctrinal belief either. But this crisp moral distinction between human being and human person commonly made by moral philosophers and theologians might not be made by people in general. What do we know about that?

The Empirical and Political Reality of Attitudes About Dignity

If SA cannot be inferred from behaviour and not from doctrinal belief, can it be inferred from what people report when they are explicitly asked? When Egonsson's book was published in the late 1990s there was not much reliable data on that, but there is now. A recently published study investigated, through a series of controlled

tests, the bases of “moral anthropocentrism” (the view that humans have moral priority over other beings) as a psychological phenomenon (Caviola et. al., 2022). The study was designed to capture specifically whether the moral priority of humans is explained by a valuation of mental capacities (personhood) or by sheer speciesism. The conclusion is that people do give priority to humans over non-humans and that there is a mix of reasons why. Mere species-membership is one of them, but some moral weight is also given to mental capacity (Caviola et. al., 2022, 11). All else being equal, respondents give more weight to individuals with higher mental faculties, suggesting that belief in humans’ higher mental capacities explains the speciesism. The results suggest that giving more moral weight to human life *per se* – as in SA – is in itself a thick judgement, infused with assumptions about what humans are capable of. This holds at least when people are explicitly asked to make these judgements in comparisons between humans and non-human rather than between different human beings. The latter complicates matters.

In a larger context of prioritizing and favouritism, the authors of the study note that there is ample evidence of people prioritizing members of their own human ingroup, based on nationality, religion, political views, etc., compared to humans associated with other groups. They also conclude that humans giving priority to humans when compared to non-human animals is an extended form of such ingroup favouritism (Caviola et. al., 2022, 16). Confronted by a choice between humans and non-humans, humans favour humans because they identify with humans. When the choice is instead between human individuals associated with different groups, the same process of ingroup favouritism will favour humans associated with a group to which one’s affiliation is stronger. Swedes favouring Swedes over Syrians, Christians favouring Christians over Muslims, and men favouring men over women are, if this interpretation holds up, psychologically not much different from humans favouring humans over non-humans. A difference would be that there is a socially acceptable moral justification in the latter case, and since people like to be seen as morally upright, they are more likely to report biases that are socially accepted, like favouring humans over animals. But these are not stable moral categories; they are culturally and historically fluid and open to contestation, for good and bad. The more socially acceptable racist and sexist attitudes are, the less is the moral cost of signalling them. It should be remembered that racist and sexist attitudes typically entail assumptions of lesser mental capacities in disfavoured groups. Assumptions of lesser mental capacities – less dignity – in one group can therefore be explained by already existing hostility against that group, rather than the other way around.

If, as the research by Caviola et. al. suggests, humans favouring humans is an exercise of ingroup bias, not a universalized corrective to ingroup bias, then SA stands on shakier ground against “the serious objection” (Egonsson 1998, 86) that accommodating widely shared pro-human attitudes commits the philosopher to also accommodating racist, nationalist, sexist and similar attitudes if they are also widely shared, which they are. If we want to say that pro-human attitudes are morally

relevant while racist and sexist ones are not (Ibid., 87), we are already making normative statements.

As Goodhart points out, attitudes about dignity are socially constructed standards that are conditioned by dominant norms and understandings of appropriate practices (Goodhart 2018, 405). Socioeconomic and political inequalities shape social norms and peoples' attitudes to themselves and others and mark some people as less worthy of concern and respect, as well as of a voice and a decent wage. The social reality of dignity is shaped by power and convention but as such is also malleable by critical counter-discourses.

I agree with Dan Egonsson that moral (and political) philosophers should engage with social attitudes that people actually hold. As Wollstonecraft put it: "we must mix in the throng, and [...], attain a knowledge of others" (1995 [1792], 196). But accounting for moral attitudes must also be to critically account for the non-ideal political reality in which they are formed, including how the precarity of vulnerable and subordinated groups feature in the legitimation of attitudes that mark them as less dignified, less human.

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