

The Dignity of the Human Person: On the Integrity of the Body and the Struggle for Recognition

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What is human dignity? The word *dignitas* is hard to define and refers sometimes to the respect a human being deserves, sometimes to the respect due to oneself. Yet again it can be a question of honour. But, as Simone Weil points out, honour is 'that vital need of the human spirit' which is not satisfied by respect, since respect is 'the same for everyone and immutable' whereas 'honour is related to human beings seen not simply as such but in their social context'.¹ Honour needs to be acknowledged, because it is connected to some significant fact, a tradition, a history, of an individual, family or group. Honour is on a level with greatness and reputation. It can also be tarnished and scorned. That is why, in many cultures, it must be avenged by violence or blood, by an outstanding act which alone 'washes away' the shame that could stain it. Maybe we should go beyond respect and honour, for nowadays, in all areas of life, it is the lack of human dignity that is problematic. From the law to politics via philosophy, economics, medicine and the new information and communication technologies, approaches to human dignity are as diverse as the cultures, knowledge and beliefs that feed into the debates.² Nevertheless, above and beyond the many viewpoints, we are talking about humanity, its present and future, not an abstract humanity but one that is embodied in the 'human person' in the singular, that could be recognizable wherever it is, that is indivisible and in itself sums up the whole of the human race. Humanity cannot be measured against anything else because it seems to be the measure, the principle and the end we seek. And yet we might be tempted to say it exists before our eyes. For we see first of all human bodies. That is probably where we should begin our enquiry into human dignity.

The integrity of the human body, whether alive or dead, its transformation into an object, animal or thing, gives us the opportunity to imagine human dignity or lack of it, and also one of the ways it supports its presence: through speech. To know

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SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192107080713

humans, to know ourselves, is to know the spirit, as Plato believes. But is it possible to know oneself? To recognize another human? What is mutual knowledge and recognition? For Aristotle, humans are first and foremost intelligence before being political animals, for example. The speaking being is endowed with intelligence and thought, as opposed to the animal. But what about the human confronted with the human? What becomes of the humanity in the individual through the action or observation of another individual?

The individual confronted with another individual

Humanity is not solely, as we might think, being separated from nature, the privilege of an all-conquering reason, with the benefit of science and technology. It is not the gradual transition to an increasingly elevated culture and mind, maybe to a 'civilization' from which we could classify all the other cultures. We know how this view allowed Europeans, from the 18th century onwards, to explore, conquer and colonize certain peoples.³ Humanity does not lie in the ability to retreat to a territory, the ancestral values of lands or nation.⁴ Such a view has its limits, which might today be thought of as sectarian quests or retreats.

Humanity is also revealed when each action is accompanied and completed by words.⁵ It can be analysed in its modes of articulating, staging, in its political, legal and social processes.⁶ Though speech appears as a spectacle in public, under the meeting tree in Africa, at gatherings and law courts, it precedes and encourages the reciprocal recognition of the human beings there. For is not speech, with the voice and the breath issuing forth from a human body, always addressed to another body? To a certain extent it is heard by another body, which receives it or not. As Louis Lavelle says: 'If people are always so sensitive to the prestige of speech, if speech alone can touch them, move them and enlighten them, it is speech which delivers the other's presence to us and confirms our presence to ourselves by making manifest our mutual participation in the same truth.'⁷ And does this truth not deserve to be called human dignity?

Literary texts as well as other artistic productions give us the opportunity to follow some strands of the human dignity question with reference to concrete situations, since we are dealing with characters any reader can identify with. Thus, in Sony Labou Tansi's *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*,⁸ a man, Lorsa Lopez, kills his wife because of her infidelity and the whole town of Valancia, caught up in political problems and endless rivalry with the new capital, turns a blind eye and lets him do it. Then the town wakes up next morning amid reports of the *crime passionnel*. It waits 47 years for the police to come. Throughout these years Lorsa Lopez expiates his errors, he lives on the fringes of society, he drives nails into his body. Everyone thinks he has gone mad. When the police turn up, the court and its public session prefer the word of a parrot rather than that of a man, Lopez himself. Lorsa Lopez understands that, having become a naked man, dismissed from his own trial, he has left human reason and the circle of instrumentalized speech without ever, in his own eyes, abandoning the site of dignity. He has not been found guilty by the law but he feels responsible, he no longer expects anything of human justice. Naked, deprived

of speech and honour in his community, is he therefore stripped of his humanity? Human dignity seems the one place, before every positive right, in this society where a gulf is opening up between those who represent the state and the citizens⁹ who offer hospitality to all the foreigners stopping by.

Human bodies, transformable objects?

The human body is that composite of organs and functions that belong to the human being and that cannot be conceived of separately from that person,¹⁰ who is an individual, an indivisible entity.¹¹ In the word 'person' we may find the sense of 'mask', like the one actors wore on the stage in ancient Greece. But every person is not empty space or nothingness in the common meaning of the phrase '*il n'y a personne* (no one's there)'.¹² The human person is probably the being that is both hidden and shown, veiled and revealed like a face or dressed and naked like a body. Here the mask is an integral part of the person, it is the whole of it, the fullness and the being – not an external addition attached to the being like a possession or a property. So from this viewpoint we might ask whether most western philosophers, who stress the primacy of thought and intelligence compared with the body and sensibility, have not for various reasons neglected the human body as the first sign and group of networks in which dignity is manifested. But the experience of dignity is lived in day-to-day life as deprivation or lack. It is as if our own body and the other person's were indissolubly connected over and above our social allegiance and culture, and as if each body were free to be born, live and die because it is human and not divine or manufactured – like a machine. To refer to each human body's freedom, to think that all bodies can face the same destiny, that of human beings, is to forget that the issue of the production of humanity arises.¹³ Bodies and souls are observed. Undesirables can be made to die, they can be thrown into camps. Human beings can be sorted according to categories that are becoming significant in a period of globalization: individuals are no longer human persons with inalienable rights who may be the citizens of this or that state and obey its laws. In a time of globalization the category of mobility and migration comes into play alongside those that have long been current, such as racial purity or degree of civilization.

Nowadays, thinking that the care to be given to the living body includes gymnastics, sport, hygiene as well as keeping healthy, as has long been the case in many cultures, may turn out to be an illusion. If the human being has only one physical body, which is not eternal or transformable, except superficially by physical exercise or cosmetic surgery, as most people still believe, there may be political interference in the life of the individual as a human person. That person thinks it is possible to be their own end, and not a means or object to further another goal, as Kant's theory has it. Thus they can be neither sold nor exchanged, at least they hope not. However, attacks on the integrity of the body are many: from slavery to genocide via the fate meted out to illegal immigrants, asylum-seekers, refugees and those without official papers. Illegal immigrants were sent back to Ceuta and Melilla in 2005, cast into the Moroccan desert without water or food, like things or objects, and could appear before the cameras only with skeletal bodies and blank eyes, registering below the

threshold of any humanity. What can be seen in such an example is neither the intelligence nor the soul or mind of people who wear a label, it is first the body which shows all its vulnerability and fragility.

Thus human dignity is first of all the dignity of the body, alive or dead. A text from Aristotle in which he disagrees with Democritus about the corpse says: 'So he states that everyone can see what the shape of a person is since it is the external structure and the colour that make them recognizable. But a dead body has the same external appearance too and it is not a person.'¹⁴ In Aristotle's view the human body, like the animal body, is first and foremost living, and the soul is thought of as the life principle. But in many cultures, in Africa and elsewhere, from time immemorial the respect due to the human being is first due to the dead. Indeed honouring the body and the memory of the dead is a requirement, which is why they are not left just anywhere like lifeless things, in the open. Great care is taken with them. Their departure and journey into the other world is accompanied with rituals, as is shown by archeological discoveries in Egypt, where the objects in the tombs inform us about beliefs, daily life and also the care and respect due to every human being leaving the life below. The *Book of the Dead*, a collection of sayings that the dead person had to learn while they were alive, was slipped into the coffin and was composed and sometimes copiously illustrated by a scribe on a papyrus roll. Other texts of the same type existed among the Maya and the Tibetans. Still today some beliefs require, for instance, that dead bodies should be fed. Meals are regularly brought to the tomb and people speak to them. During the ceremonies preceding burial they may be asked, as is still the case in Côte d'Ivoire, the cause of death and more precisely to point out by a sign or movement the person who caused them to fall to the other side of life. For people think that every death has an unnatural cause. Whatever a person's social standing in society, whether rich or poor, good-looking or ugly, when they die they have a right to be buried. Everyone bows their head before their memory. If they have been a criminal in their lifetime, all grudges against them must be wiped away, if only for a brief moment. Bowing your head before the dead, honouring their memory, does that not mean demonstrating a relationship with them that exists only between two human beings? That is why movements of peoples who are forced to leave the place where they live – in emergency situations such as war, famine, flood or drought – may be experienced as veritable internal dramas. To inhabit a place means to live together with the living and the dead, since it appears that they 'never went away', they do not die, they are in the air and the wind, as the writer Birago Diop says.¹⁵

Furthermore, no matter what the cultures and beliefs, is the desecration of a grave or cemetery not always regarded as a morally unworthy act on the part of the perpetrator and also as an attack on the honour of the dead and their family? However, the effect of the act goes still further, it is an ethical issue: to desecrate the site where a single human body is buried is also to attack the humanity of the living person and the humanity the person retains indefinitely, beyond death, because 'desecrate' means to quit the sphere of the sacred and more precisely to violate it. It is as if a frontier with a strong symbolic charge had been crossed. And in every society such a transgression is comparable to a crime,¹⁶ which, as Simone Weil says, deserves punishment, as the only means by which the criminals can be brought back

within the network of social obligations so that they can be reintegrated into society and reclaim the right to 'social esteem'.¹⁷

If there exist in every society and culture duties on each human being towards the dead, all the more reason why there should be duties towards the living. But throughout history, and sometimes quite scandalously, the human body has been the object of all kinds of transactions and transformations, real or imaginary, attacking its integrity, damaging its indivisibility as the body of a person who is also a soul and a sensibility, a mind and a consciousness, a memory and an imagination, passion and aspiration, will and freedom.

Indignation and concern for dignity

So we might be tempted to say that being aware that a human being is stripped of their dignity precedes any theorization: 'Indignation, or even anger in Camus' sense of the word, brings human dignity back to life.'¹⁸ But is being able to feel indignation and anger not above all possessing sensitivity, not just the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain as Aristotle thought, defining what humans have in common with animals, does it not also show that we have a heart, both literally and metaphorically? For *to have a heart* means to possess a vital organ which, if it happened to stop functioning, would mean the end of biological life, the life of the body. And *to have heart* means to show courage, anger, love and hatred. If we refer to Plato's classification of the faculties of the soul, he talks about the heart, the second part of the soul, and not the head or the belly.¹⁹ In this sense what impels us to see the fragility, vulnerability or nakedness of a human being crushed by a fate or a machine manufactured by humans is the concern we have for that person as if they were ourselves. And so, faced with a human being's vulnerability, as stories often show (tales about orphans, beggars, helpless people in general),²⁰ there is probably that feeling of pity that Rousseau speaks of: 'Indeed what is generosity, clemency, humanity, other than pity applied to the weak, the guilty or the human race in general?'²¹ But nowadays, in the face of unspeakable disasters, in the face of horror, we are gripped by terror, which prevents us from acting and silences the words we could speak to those who have no voice. For instance, in the case of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, despite the explanations that place the greater part of the blame on international bodies, the question raised by a disaster of that sort entirely caused by humans assisted by a rudimentary weapon – the machete – is certainly one of human dignity. Separating the good people from the bad. Systematically exterminating the latter. Is that not applying a theory of eugenics whereby only the best have the right to live? We note that the rhetoric which turns the bad body into an insect, 'a cockroach', was current.²² Those undesirable bodies, transformed by the imaginary and a politico-social and media rhetoric, were left to rot in the open. It is here precisely that we could talk about being stripped of dignity to the extent that those bodies were no longer human, so they could decay or be food for dogs.²³ When human beings no longer have any concern for other humans, when they are not only happy to kill but also to ignore the existence of the dead, when they can no longer recognize them for what they are, can we ask dogs to recognize them?

We could cite other well-known examples. First the existence of concentration camps during the Second World War. There are books and a long list of films. Here one film seems to emerge from the commonality and sing of the dignity of the self and staying on your feet despite your fragility and vulnerability, despite all the threats hanging over your life. Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* (in which he appears) cannot leave any human being indifferent. In Italy just before the Second World War a young bookseller called Guido, who seems to take nothing seriously, marries a schoolteacher (Dora), whom he stole from a local dignitary on the day they were to get engaged. They set up home, lead a quiet life and have a son. The day comes when iniquitous laws allow Jews to be arrested and deported. Guido ends up being arrested with his son Giosue. Dora, who is not Jewish, hurls herself into the same train as her husband and son out of love for them. There follows a series of episodes showing the harshness and horrors of life in the camp. The father always has just one word for his son: in the worst situations he repeats tirelessly that a tank will come to set them free from that terrible place. The child learns to stay hidden because he knows that old people and children go to the gas chamber, from which they emerge 'turned into soap'. The dream comes true when the boy finds himself alone in the middle of a deserted camp after his father has been shot, and a tank appears driven by an American who takes him under his wing. In the end he finds his mother safe and sound.

The plot of this story shows us how much words can humanize life in a situation when horror is nameless, when life is hanging by just a thread for yourself and your nearest and dearest. Words like that, light and confident, which transform imprisonment and the harsh conditions of real life into a magical dream, change the ever-present fear of death into hope. And so we might conclude that people are still human when they allow themselves to speak to those they love. Defying all the laws and all the rules for permitted behaviour and transcending their own limits.

Therefore it is still allowable, so as not to forget the unspeakable, to write, film, tell stories and laugh after Auschwitz, Rwanda and all the horrors which continue to take away their dignity from each human being, and thus from the whole of humanity. But here non-political words, so to speak, are connected with a secret life, remain in hiding, or almost so, always addressed to the nearest and to oneself, as a memory-jogger; words of resistance and not justice, as if to say 'we are still alive, so who can turn our bodies into ashes or soap?'

We might cite a final example of being stripped of human dignity: the slave trade. Here it is not only a matter of humans transformable into things or into animals but one where the body is sold to the highest bidder, depending on its physical strength. At the time when Kant was publishing his writings, which are today recognized as one of the essential references for the study of human dignity, actual women, children and men were far from being able to be free in their thoughts, their movements and their bodies. Subjected to inhuman treatment, snatched away from their lands, their dead, their social networks and codes, carrying away with them their wounded memory, they belong to the sea-crossing because they are neither from their own land, a country they will not see again, nor from the new land where, after being sold, they are treated like beasts of burden.

Difficult recognition

On reflection we may be surprised that, at the start of the 21st century, western philosophers, who are quick to defend, like Kant, independence of thought and of the subject, should have forgotten somewhat to see humanity as one and indivisible, humanity from a concrete point of view, the humanity of each human being and not just some; the humanity of all human beings who, individually, represent the whole of humanity. I am not talking here about the various declarations, the one of 1789 or the one called 'the universal declaration of human rights' of 10 December 1948, made following the horrors suffered by human beings during the Second World War. We might wonder whether philosophers had considered the paradoxical fate of the slave: the person who must find their own dignity after being scorned by another in their body and in their spirit for economic reasons. Essential texts²⁴ such as Hegel's writing about the master–slave dialectic in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*²⁵ exist. So slavery is a violence at the origins of history. The slave's work is the price to be paid for the freedom of the mind after the subjugation of the body. But how should humanity and dignity be retrieved after being turned into a thing and an instrument and sold like goods? Today that question should also be for philosophy. The issue of memory – all the memories – should encourage philosophical reflection. If it seems to go together with the issue of reparation, this cannot be achieved without recognition. Does to repair not mean to rejoin a broken link, fill in a forgotten hole? Maybe it means rethinking the 'black hole' in the history of humanity, the history of women, men and children in that situation. And rethinking the links between people could be achieved through the stories of forgetting the horrors and going beyond all that, for instance the indignation and resentment, towards peace at heart, the vital organ and the symbol of the ability to relate.

In a world where every relationship, in order to be viable, enters into the 'system of goods' where everything is bought and sold, human dignity is in 'the category of the priceless', as Ricoeur writes in *Parcours de la reconnaissance*.²⁶ And is what falls into that category not a value in itself over and above the gift of things, the money and debt systems, that of redistribution in a system of solidarity? Human dignity is a value in itself because it speaks of the human, like certain cultures where giving your word²⁷ is another type of contract with a 'human face' which has an ethical and not a political or legal character. Is not giving your word a gift of yourself?

When an actual person is stripped of dignity, as we have shown, it is first the integrity of the body that is affected for it has lost everything good: a suffering body, naked, fragile, helpless, diminished, crushed. But that body bears the whole of human life, visible and tangible, whatever you might say.²⁸ There then follows this second aspect of dignity, which contains a paradox: the suffering body, seen as non-human, transformable or saleable in another's eyes, is that very body where dignity is manifested as resistance to death and horror, which with life is found again through the words addressed to the other. That body is greatness, the raising of a spirit which inseparably linked to it. In a particular situation a person is never conscious of their own dignity except through the other's actions: the other's look, the changes the other makes them undergo as if they were an object, the travails the other puts them through.

To conclude, human dignity – the idea, the principle, the requirement – which shines because of its absence from the daily life of many individuals, is manifest in every human relationship from the first glance, the first word,²⁹ the first encounter as a mutual recognition of one another. But this recognition may turn out to be an endless task. And we must be able to think that even the dead recognize us as human beings when we bow our heads before their memory, which raises our spirit towards what is beyond life.

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Notes

1. Simone Weil (1949) *L'Enracinement, prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain*. See Collection Folio Essais, pp. 31–2.
2. Thomas de Koninck and Gilbert Laroche (2005).
3. See, for example, Robert Legros (1990).
4. In the 18th century in Germany Herder was one of those who conceived of these values. See, for example, Pierre Pénisson (1992); and Anne-Marie Thiesse (1999), Collection Points, pp. 34–43.
5. As is demonstrated by the texts selected and presented by Germaine Dieterlen (1965, 2nd edn).
6. See Jean-Godefroy Bidima (1997).
7. Louis Lavelle (1942), see Editions du Félin, 2005, p. 105.
8. Sony Labou Tansi (1985) and reissued in Collection Points, Seuil, 1994.
9. According to Estina Bronzario, the 'bronze woman' in the novel: 'You can put your capital city wherever you like, make it whatever size you want; you can build it on a cliff-top or in the Balgaza marshes, what do we care as long as we have decided to build the precise-person-place-of-honour and dignity? We are the children of transcendence: we want to build the hope to dream another dream' (Tansi, 1985: 97).
10. Even though debates in medical science today include ways of prolonging or suspending life. These methods may also be parts of a human body, organs taken from other bodies.
11. One of the problems confronting people in Africa is thinking of themselves and being accepted as individuals and citizens. Speech codes and networks of connection, both visible and invisible, are very complex.
12. In some African languages the phrase indicates and proclaims, literally: 'there's no human!'
13. See, for example, *Tumultes* vol. 1, no. 25: 'La fabrication de l'humain', edited by Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, Numa Murard and Raphaëlle Nollez-Goldbach (2005).
14. Aristotle, *The Parts of Animals*, Book I, ch. 1, 640b 30–5.
15. See Birago Diop (1960) 'Souffles' in *Leurs et Lueurs*, poems.
16. Today this kind of crime can be not only imagined but carried out because it falls into the category of political acts in time of war between enemies. Graves of politicians' relatives were desecrated on both sides in Côte d'Ivoire in 2005. So you might think that political opponents had turned into open enemies since from political conflict the sacred threshold of human dignity was crossed.
17. See Simone Weil (1949: 33).
18. Thomas de Koninck and Gilbert Laroche (2005: 10) preface.
19. This is the principle of the ardour of the heart which must submit to the rational principle; Plato talks about it in these terms: 'But on the other hand what happens when someone thinks they are the object of an injustice? Do we not see them boil with indignation and fight for what they think is just?' (*Republic*, IV: 440c).
20. Of which there are so many in West Africa; see for example Bernard Dadié's *Le Pagne noir* (1955), and by the same author and from the same publisher, *Les Contes de Koutou-as-Samala* (1982).

21. J.-J. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), first part.
22. Apart from the many studies on the Rwanda genocide, films and also literary texts have appeared. Mention could be made of the dozen or so novels by African writers who went there four years later, supported by *FestAfrica*, a Lille literary festival.
23. See Abdourhaman A. Waberi, *Moissons de cranes* (2004: 56): 'Everyone asks why I keep this big dog close by me. He was as dry as bamboo, he got fat on human flesh during the genocide. People say he ate members of the family, here everyone knows everyone and so this dog ate people he knew. Some were only wounded and the dogs finished them off. (Silence.) As if they too were doing the work of the *interahmwe* militia.'
24. However, some texts forgotten by philosophical analyses do not fail to give food for thought, like certain passages from Voltaire's *Zadig ou la destinée* (1747) in which, at a particular point in his journey, the main character lives like a slave: 'His person was put up for sale in public', he is bought by the Arab merchant Sétoc, but for a higher price because 'the servant, who was more likely to tire, was sold for a higher price than the master'. See also chapter 19 of his *Candide ou l'optimisme* (1759): 'What happened to them in Surinam and how Candide met Martin'. In it Voltaire deals with the issue of the slave's dignity and his rights in a short passage. On leaving Eldorado Candide sees at the entrance to Surinam a 'negro lying on the ground wearing only half his clothes, that is blue canvas shorts...'; the man's replies to Candide's questions remind us of the black code that governed slaves' lives at that time. See the recent reissue (2006) of *Codes Noirs, de l'esclavage aux abolitions*, texts presented by André Castaldo, with an introduction by Christiane Taubira.
25. And in ancient philosophy the conception of the slave 'as an animate instrument' in Book I of Aristotle's *Politics*.
26. Paul Ricoeur (2004) and republished in *Folio Essais*, 2005.
27. In many democracies in Africa politics, as a very noble way of running public affairs, seems to be losing its rights, and being perverted, because the continual use of trickery, the transformation of the public sphere into a private one, or the constant collusion between the two spheres, are making giving your word a valueless pact, just a tactical move in a permanent performance.
28. This analysis by Jean-François Mattéi gives food for thought: 'If the category of bodies does not engender for the human being any dignity, whether it is connected with beauty, health or strength, the category of minds, which in fact is higher, does not bring any more' (see *La Dignité humaine*, De Koninck and Larochelle, 2005: 168). When we talk here about the integrity of the human body, it is not a matter, we hope, of the body's qualities, which may vary from one human being to another. The integrated body is the whole of the body which, in each unique body, sums up what makes it worthy to be considered by everyone as human. Laws can assist with this consideration and the recognition of the human being with such a body, but is that enough because, between the existence of laws and their effective application, there seems increasingly to be a gulf that does not dare admit to being one.
29. This is also weaving, creating bonds, passing from one to the other, staying and living together, according to the idea of speech among the Dogon, as is shown by the research carried out by Marcel Griaule, Geneviève Calame-Griaule, Jean Rouch and Germaine Dieterlen. We might compare this conception of speech as weaving to the vision of politics as a 'royal weaver' in the *Politics* (see Plato, *Politics*, 268a ff.).

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