

Do not make yourself a worm – A duty to oneself to respect one's own dignity

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Katharina Bauer, Rotterdam

Discussions about the dignity of human beings often focus on violations of a person's dignity that are performed by other persons (like for example in A. Margalit's theory of humiliation). But human beings can also violate their own dignity or at least they can expose it to a violation by others thoughtlessly or intentionally. Why and how exactly can persons infringe or even forfeit their own dignity as a result of particular actions or of a particular self-view – for instance through submissive and servile behavior? And is a self-violation of one's own dignity a moral failure such as the violation of the dignity of other human beings? With Kant I will argue that it has to be regarded as the violation of a duty towards oneself. In his "Metaphysics of Morals" Kant states that "[o]ne who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him". He introduces a duty to oneself to respect oneself and to avoid servility – or not *to make oneself a worm*. I argue for a wider understanding of this duty: Persons ought to respect their own dignity as persons with autonomy, rationality, and morality (A), but also as personalities, who embody dignity and live a dignified life (B). A corresponds to Kant's concept of duty as the necessity of an action done out of respect for the moral law, B is an obligation out of a practical necessity that follows from one's self-understanding as an individual personality in a socio-cultural context. A and B relate to two types of dignity that are discussed in current debates. I suggest that both types of dignity are equally relevant for understanding and respecting one's own dignity. Finally I discuss why, even though persons can behave like worms, others ought not to step on them.

1) Servility as the violation of a duty towards oneself

In his "Metaphysics of Morals" Kant states that "[o]ne who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him" (MS VI 437). He introduces a duty to oneself to respect oneself and to avoid servility – or not *to make oneself a worm*.

- "Since he must regard himself not only as a person generally but also as a *human being*, that is, as a person who has duties his own reason lays upon him, his insignificance as a *human animal* may not infringe upon his consciousness of his dignity *as a rational human being*, and he should not disavow the moral self-esteem of such a being, that is he should pursue his end, which is in itself a duty, not abjectly, not in *servile spirit (animo servili)* as if he were seeking a favor, not disavowing his dignity, but always with consciousness of

his sublime moral predisposition (which is already contained in the concept of virtue). And this *self-esteem* is a duty of man to himself.” (M VI 435)

- “Be no man’s lackey. – Do not let others tread with impunity on your rights.” (M VI 436)
- “Bowling and scraping before a human being seems in any case to be unworthy of a human being.” (M VI 437)

It is often pointed out that Kant’s concept of dignity is one of the main sources of the modern concept of human dignity. But (as Oliver Sensen and others have shown) Kant refers back to the ancient idea of a noble status of the human being in nature, which is due to the faculties of reason and morality.

The Kantian dignity of the person is based on the dignity of the moral law, which human beings autonomously legislate to themselves. When Kant uses the term ‘dignity’ in his *Groundwork* he mainly refers to the dignity of the moral law or of reason as such.

After implementing the Formula of Humanity of the categorical imperative that says that each person ought to “treat itself and all others never merely as means, but always at the same time as end in itself” (G IV 433), he also introduces the highly influential “idea of the dignity of a rational being that obeys no law except that which at the same time it gives itself” (G IV 434). He defines dignity as being „elevated above all price“ (ibid.) What has dignity „admits of no equivalent“ it does not „merely [have] a relative worth, i.e., a price, but rather an inner worth“ (434f.). It is nonnegotiable and irreplaceable. According to Kant these features of dignity include „the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself“ and he continues:

„Now morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, because only through morality is it possible to be a legislative member in the realm of ends. Thus morality and humanity, insofar as it is capable of morality, is that alone which has dignity.“ (G IV 435)

Morality and humanity are inseparably intertwined in Kant’s account of dignity. It is the human being as a moral being (at least potentially), which has dignity, and thus has to be treated as an end in itself. This also means that a person has to treat herself as an end in itself according to her own dignity.

It contradicts to the categorical imperative to treat oneself as a mere means and it is a vice to “throw oneself away and make oneself an object of contempt” through “lying, avarice, and false humility (servility)”. (ibid.)

The opposed virtue “could be called *love of honor*” (ibid.). Any person has a duty toward herself to realize - and not to violate - her innate dignity as an autonomous person according to Kant (M VI 420). Each person owes this to herself (M VI 418). In Kant’s theory of dignity, the internal relationship of a person to herself, to her own principles and maxims and to her own rational capacities is most important. A person ought to respect herself as a person – which means to respect herself as an autonomous moral being.

2) Self-respect - towards moral standards and towards personal standards

In general, self-respect or self-esteem in a broader sense can be regarded as the opposite of violating one’s dignity. In his famous paper on *Servility and Self-Respect* Thomas E. Hill picks up the special Kantian notion of self-respect and transforms it into “respect not for one’s merits but respect for one’s rights” (Hill 1973, 97). He regards the lack of self-respect of a servile person as a lack of respect towards the system of morality that ought to coordinate and protect the rights of persons. The servile person has the wrong “attitude concerning one’s rightful place in a moral community” (Hill 1973, 90).

In *Self-Respect Reconsidered* (1991) there is an interesting shift in Hill's argumentation. Self-respect here requires not to deny one's moral, but also one's *personal* standards or not to sell them (and thus oneself) below value. When it comes to personal standards the problem of servility is no longer a lack of recognition of the system of morality, but it could still be described as the problem of not recognizing oneself as an equal member of a socio-cultural system of coexistence and communication. The duty to avoid servility is thus much more than a duty to oneself, both at the level of self-respect as a person and at the level of self-esteem of one's personality, personal beliefs and standards. It can be redescribed as a twofold duty to respect oneself as a person *and* as an individual personality aiming at a successful interaction and

communication with other persons in the Kingdom of Ends as well as in a social context in the broader sense.

3) A double claim of dignity

In current as well as in classical debates about dignity, one can distinguish between two different types of understanding this concept:

Type A:

- Dignity is understood as an inherent value of the human being as such.
- It is related to the individual human being and / or to the human species.
- This dignity 'is just there'. It is a given value or a fact.

Type B:

- Dignity is regarded as an individual, personal way of living or as a particular attitude towards oneself / others / one's life.
- Dignity is considered as a self-relationship of a person and / or as an attribution by others.
- Dignity 'is made' or achieved in a way of living one's life. It has to be realized procedurally and recognized mutually in interpersonal encounters.

To understand oneself as a being with dignity in a comprehensive sense means to recognize a double claim of dignity, which refers both to the understanding of dignity as the value inherent in human beings qua being human (A) and to dignity as an attitude, practice or lifestyle of individual human beings (B). Corresponding to one's own dignity thus implies

A. to respect oneself as a rational and moral autonomous person who gives oneself principles and sets oneself ends.

B. to value oneself as an individual, self-determined personality who chooses particular goals or personal standards and shapes one's individual identity and lifestyle in dignity.

This double duty towards oneself to correspond to one's own dignity is the basis of a duty to respect the dignity of others in both respects as well. However, the duty against oneself not to make oneself a worm should not just be seen as a means to the end of valuing and treating others adequately or of contributing to the system of morality. The claim to fully respect the dignity of the person is simply the same - whether it is another person or the person you are.

4) Making oneself a worm?

According to the duty to correspond to one's own dignity, it is obvious that a person should not "make herself a worm". However, it is obvious as well that people do not simply become worms (and not just because of the material, physical problems that this would entail). It may be possible to 'bow and scrap' before others while still being well aware of the fact that one just plays a particular role – for example the role of a servant – without really violating one's dignity as a person. But even if a person loses herself or her self-respect in behaving "like a worm", it remains a central human ability to distance oneself from one's own behaviour, to re-evaluate it and thus to keep the chance to leave the degrading position again. Human beings cannot completely and irreversibly "make themselves worms" for two reasons:

- 1. because the yardstick by which they are measured always remains the yardstick of humanity.*

Aaron Bunch formulates it accordingly:

“The dignity of humanity is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it grants me the authority to claim respect from other persons. On the other hand, if I refuse to assert that claim, if I throw it away, the humanity is the ideal by which others find me contemptible.”¹

My dignity as a human being gives me the right to assert my claim to the recognition of others. But if I do not assert this claim and throw away my dignity, I will still be regarded as human by others. I am measured by the standard of humanity, and I am disregarded precisely because I miss it. Beyond Bunch's thesis, this does not only apply in relation to the judgement of others. The ideal of humanity also remains the yardstick of one's own self-evaluation.

2. *because people see each other from the point of view of humanity as potential partners of interaction and communication with a potential practical significance for each other.*

This applies regardless of the current state of a person or of how he or she has changed, e.g. due to age or illness. It would be worth discussing whether it is completely irrelevant here how someone behaves or how he acts. As a rule, however, one can assume that one can continue to see the potential of a person with dignity in a self-degraded person. And in any case one can assume that one should do this from the point of view of humanity.

It is thus important not to succumb to the temptation to step on the one who has made himself a worm. Rather, it is a matter of seeing his or her ability no longer to crawl, but to stand up again. Kant is well aware of the fact that the work on one's own perfection, which is the ultimate goal of the duties towards oneself, remains a continuing and difficult process that does not always run straight. Accordingly, the person who has 'made himself a worm' or behaved like a worm, if others step on him, retains the right to demand recognition again. However, he will only succeed in this if he also succeeds in looking at himself as a human being – as an autonomous person with a unique personality - and thus in respecting his own dignity.

¹ Bunch, A. (2014). Throwing Oneself Away. Kant on the Forfeiture of Respect, in: Kantian Review, 19, 71-91. 87f.

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