

Kant's Conception of Human Dignity

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Abstract: In this article I argue that Kant's conception of dignity is commonly misunderstood. On the basis of a few passages in the *Grundlegung* scholars often attribute to Kant a view of dignity as an absolute inner value all human beings possess. However, a different picture emerges if one takes into account all the passages in which Kant uses 'dignity'. I shall argue that Kant's conception of dignity is a more Stoic one: He conceives of dignity as sublimity (*Erhabenheit*) or the highest elevation of something over something else. 'Dignity' expresses that something is 'raised above' all else. What it is raised above, and in virtue of what, depends on the context in which Kant uses 'dignity'. For instance, he talks about the dignity of a monarch to refer to his rank as the ruler of his subjects. When Kant refers to the dignity of humanity, he expresses the view that human beings have a prerogative over the rest of nature in virtue of being free. What Kant is saying in the famous *Grundlegung* passage on dignity is that morality is raised above other determinations of will in that morality alone should be valued unconditionally. In unfolding the complicated usage of 'dignity' in Kant's works, my reading helps to bring out the coherence of his ethics.

Key words: Absolute value, dignitas, human dignity, Menschenwürde, Würde

Introduction

It is a common view in the literature that Kant conceives of human dignity as an absolute inner value all human beings possess.¹ It is also widely believed that this value is the reason why one should respect others.² In this paper I shall argue that a different picture emerges if one takes into account all the passages in which Kant

¹ See, for instance, Paton, H. J.: *The Categorical Imperative*. London 1947, 189; Lo, P. C.: *Treating Persons as Ends*. Lanham 1987, 165; Löhner, Guido: *Menschliche Würde*. Freiburg 1995, 34–44; Forschner, M.: "Marktpreis und Würde; oder vom Adel der menschlichen Natur". In: *Die Würde des Menschen*. Ed. by H. Kössler. Nürnberg 1998, 38; Wood, A.: *Kant's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge 1999, 115; Schönecker, Dieter/Wood, Allen: *Immanuel Kant "Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten."* Ein einführender Kommentar. Paderborn 2003, 142. For a sceptical note on this prominent view see Meyer, Michael: "Dignity, Rights, and Self-Control". In: *Ethics* 99 (April 1989), 520–534.

² See Jones, H. E.: *Kant's Principle of Personality*. Madison 1971, 130: "It is because of this kind of absolute value that one ought to treat persons as ends-in-themselves and never as mere means"; but also Wood, A.: "Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature I". In: *Aristotelian Society Supplement*, 72 (1998), 189: "Kant's moral philosophy is grounded on the dignity of humanity as its sole fundamental value"; cf. Paton, *Categorical Imperative*, 171; Ross, D.: *Kant's Ethical Theory*. Oxford 1954, 52 ff.; Hutchings, P. Æ.: *Kant on Absolute Value*. Detroit 1972, 287, 290; Lo: *Persons as Ends*, 165; and Löhner: *Menschliche Würde*, 124, 34–36.

uses the term ‘dignity’ (*Würde*). The conclusion will be that – contrary to the impression created by a few well-known passages – Kant does not conceive of dignity as an inner value at all.³ Rather, Kant’s view of dignity turns out to be more in line with a Stoic conception. Specifically, throughout writings on different topics and from different periods, Kant conceives of dignity as sublimity (*Erhabenheit*) or the elevation of something over something else.⁴ Ontologically ‘dignity’ refers to a relational property of being elevated, not to a non-relational value property. ‘X has dignity’ is another expression for ‘X is elevated over Y’ or ‘X is higher than Y’. In particular, Kant specifies sublimity as the highest form of elevation⁵, so that to say ‘X has dignity’ is to say ‘X is raised above all else’. What it is raised above, and why, depends on the context in which Kant uses ‘dignity’. For instance, Kant uses expressions like “*Würde eines Monarchen*” (SF, AA 07: 19.26) to refer to the elevated position a king has in the state; when he talks about the “*Würde der Menschheit*”⁶ (dignity of humanity) he is expressing the view that human beings are elevated over the rest of nature in virtue of being free. When he talks about dignity in connection with morality⁷ he is saying that morality is raised above all else in that morality alone should be valued unconditionally. While it is indeed central to Kant’s moral philosophy that all human beings should be respected, ‘dignity’ is not the term he uses to express that view.

In order to argue for this interpretation I shall first distinguish three core usages of dignity outside the Kantian literature that explain the difference between value and elevation (Section 1). Afterwards I shall argue – relying on various passages in Kant – that for him dignity is not a non-relational value property; his usage conforms instead to a different pattern (Section 2). I shall then classify all 111 occurrences of dignity in Kant’s published writings according to this pattern (Section 3). Finally I shall defend my interpretation by looking more closely at passages where Kant does seem to characterize dignity as a value (Section 4).

³ There is a sense in which Kant can say that dignity is a value, but this sense does not carry any justificatory weight.

⁴ See e.g. “*Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*”; *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*; *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*; *Tugendlehre*; *Logik*.

⁵ Kant characterizes sublimity or *Erhabenheit* as that which is absolutely great or great without comparison, cf. KU, AA 05: 248.05–10. Another translation could be exaltedness. When Kant uses the adjective *erhaben* though, as in his work on physical geography, he does not necessarily use it in the absolute sense as being the highest form of elevation, cf. PG, AA 09: 169.05, 191.14, 342.10.

⁶ For instance, in: GMS, AA 04: 439.04, 440.11; KU, AA 05: 273.13–14; RGV, AA 06: 80.18, 183.24; MS, AA 06: 420.16, 429.16, 436.16, 449.28–29, 459.23, 462.30; Päd, AA 09: 488.36, 489.01.

⁷ Cf. GMS, AA 04: 440.01, 11; KpV, AA 05: 147.17–18; MS, AA 06: 464.18–19, 483.03.

Section 1: Three paradigms of dignity

The standard view in the Kantian literature – as mentioned above – is that dignity is a certain type of value⁸ of human beings. This value is characterized with attributes such as ‘absolute’, ‘inner’, or ‘unconditional’. What these attributes are supposed to express is that the value of human beings does not depend on anything else. Human beings simply have this value in virtue of being human.⁹ This value is often said to be the normative reason why one should respect human beings.¹⁰ The value is also described as ‘incomparable’, implying that human value cannot be traded against other value, for instance the value of things.¹¹

In the Kant literature there are few reflections on the ontological nature of this value. Kantians who do reflect on the nature of this value often conceive of it as an ontological attribute or property¹², and characterize Kant as a moral realist.¹³ What they hold is not just a modest version of realism according to which a proposition like ‘all human beings have an inner value’ has a truth-value, and not just that the truth of the proposition holds independently of human beings. A quasi-realist or expressivist, for whom moral propositions are merely an expression of one’s concerns, could agree to both claims.¹⁴ Rather what these Kantians allude to is that ontologically, within the human being, there is a non-relational value property. There is a moral fact of an “inherent, intrinsic preciousness”¹⁵. Human beings simply are precious and valuable. Some Kantians have offered arguments for the claim that

⁸ In the following I shall use ‘worth’ and ‘value’ interchangeably as Kant only used one word: ‘*Werth*’.

⁹ Cf. Löhner: *Menschliche Würde*, 43; Korsgaard, Christine: “Two Distinctions in Goodness”. In her: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge 1996, 256–262; Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, 132–139.

¹⁰ Cf. the references of note 2. For a different reading cf. O’Neill, Onora: *Constructions of Reason*. Cambridge 1989, ch. 7; and my: “Dignity and the Formula of Humanity”. In: *Kant’s Groundwork. A Critical Guide*. Ed. by Jens Timmermann. Cambridge 2009.

¹¹ Löhner, *Menschliche Würde*, 43. As David Cummiskey has pointed out, however, simply saying that human beings have a higher kind of value does not by itself prevent a utilitarian calculation between different human beings, cf. his: *Kantian Consequentialism*. Oxford 1996, 129.

¹² Cf. Schönecker, Dieter: *Kant: Grundlegung III*. Freiburg 1999, 380; Löhner, *Menschliche Würde*, 42, 17, 23f.; Korsgaard, *Kingdom of Ends*, 250, 272. Korsgaard has since changed her view; see her: “Motivation, Metaphysics, and the Value of the Self: A Reply to Ginsborg, Guyer, and Schneewind”. In: *Ethics* 109 (October 1998), 63.

¹³ See Schönecker/Wood, *Immanuel Kant*, 146; cf. Watkins, Eric/Fitzpatrick, William: “O’Neill and Korsgaard on the Construction of Normativity”. In: *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36 (June 2002), 364f.

¹⁴ Cf. Blackburn, Simon: “Errors and the Phenomenology of Value”. In: *Morality and Objectivity*. Ed. by Ted Honderich. London 1985, 1–22; Gibbard, Allan: “Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard’s Kantian Lectures”. In: *Ethics* 110 (October 1999), 142f.

¹⁵ Seifert, Josef: *The Value of Life*. Amsterdam 1997, 96; cf. Schönecker/Wood, *Immanuel Kant*, 146f.

human beings do have this inner value.¹⁶ In sum, Kantians who do reflect on the nature of inner value often turn to an ontologically ambitious version of moral realism. According to one prominent reading in the literature, human dignity is a non-relational value property human beings possess that generates normative requirements to respect them. Because of the prominence of this pattern of thought within and outside the Kantian literature¹⁷, I call it the ‘contemporary paradigm of dignity’.

The *contemporary* paradigm is different from two others that I shall call the ‘archaic’ and the ‘traditional paradigms’ respectively. The *archaic* paradigm is based on the Ancient Roman usage of *dignitas*.¹⁸ In Ancient Rome *dignitas* was primarily a political concept; it referred to the *elevated position* or higher rank of the politically powerful in society. It was an exclusive concept that applied only to a few. The position in society could be lost, but also regained. One gained the rank through political office, which itself could be gained by merit, birth, or wealth. The elevated position brought with it privileges, but it also implied duties to carry oneself and behave in accordance with one’s status. One connotation of the term ‘*dignitas*’ is the esteem the elevated position might exact from an observer.¹⁹ The *archaic* conception is still used today, if for instance one talks about a ‘dignitary’ or ‘dignified behavior’. The *archaic* paradigm makes clear that dignity does not have to be conceived of as a value human beings possess, but can refer to an elevation, for instance in rank.²⁰

¹⁶ See Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom*, 122 f., 240 f.; Löhrer, *Menschliche Würde*, 269–298; and Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, 130. I have argued elsewhere that prominent arguments fail, see my: “Dignity and the Formula of Humanity”. Some Kantians concede that Kant does not provide an argument, cf. Schönecker/Wood, *Immanuel Kant*, 145.

¹⁷ Outside the Kant literature cf. e.g. Gewirth, A.: *Human Rights*. Chicago 1982, 29 f.; Seifert, *What is Life?* 95–97; Audi, Robert: “Prospects for a Value-Based Intuitionism”. In: *Ethical Intuitionism*. Ed. by P. Stratton-Lake. Oxford 2002, 42; but also UN documents. For a discussion of dignity in UN documents cf. my: “Kants Begriff der Menschenwürde”. In: *Abwägende Vernunft*. Ed. by F.-J. Bormann/C. Schröer. Berlin 2004, 201 f.

¹⁸ To the following cf. the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Ed. by P. G. W. Glare. Oxford 1996; Wegehaupt, H.: *Die Bedeutung und Anwendung von dignitas in den Schriften der republikanischen Zeit*. Ohlau 1932; Drexler, H.: “Dignitas”. In: *Das Staatsdenken der Römer*. Ed. by R. Klein. Darmstadt 1966, 231–254; Pöschl, V.: “Der Begriff der Würde im antiken Rom und später”. In: *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse*. Heidelberg 1969, vol. 3, 7–67; and Gadamer, H.-G.: “Die Menschenwürde auf ihrem Weg von der Antike bis heute”. In: *Humanistische Bildung* 12 (1988), 95–106. Many aspects of the Roman *dignitas* are familiar from the Ancient Greeks, cf. e.g. Aristotle’s account of magnanimity (*Nicomachean Ethics* IV, 1123b–1125a). However, there was no direct equivalent of the Roman *dignitas* in the Greek language, cf. Pöschl: “Der Begriff der Würde”, 9 f.

¹⁹ Cf. again the entry in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. For an etymology of the Latin *dignitas* cf. Wegehaupt, *Anwendung von dignitas*, 5.

²⁰ While it might be the case that the ones higher in rank are also more worthy or have more value for society, this is not necessarily the case.

The third pattern of thought I want to distinguish – what I call the ‘*traditional* paradigm’²¹ – grew out of the *archaic* conception of dignity. Cicero universalized the *archaic* conception in applying *dignitas* to *all* human beings. The thought is that human beings have an elevated position in nature in virtue of having reason. As such, being elevated amounts to saying that human beings are special in nature in virtue of certain capacities (e.g. reason) that put them – unlike the rest of nature – at a distance from unreflective natural determination. Having reason is then said to yield a duty to use it in a proper way.²² The same basic structure can be found from Cicero onwards in Christian and Renaissance thinkers: Human beings are special in nature in virtue of a certain capacity (e.g. reason, freedom), and have a duty to make a proper use of it.²³ In this paper I shall argue that Kant too used the *traditional* rather than the *contemporary* paradigm of dignity. It will therefore be important to have a closer look at the differences between the two patterns of thought. Distinguishing the two paradigms is important because each of them turns out to require a different normative justification for its defense.

I want to highlight four main differences between the *contemporary* and the *traditional* paradigm of dignity. First, in the *traditional* paradigm ‘dignity’ is not the name for a non-relational value property human beings possess; it refers rather to elevation, a relational property. In saying that something is elevated over something else, one does not need to invoke a value property. For instance, if one says that human beings are elevated over the rest of nature, it merely amounts to saying that human beings are distinguished from the rest of nature by having capacities (e.g. reason, freedom) that put human beings at a distance from immediate natural determination. This instance of elevation says something about humanity’s place in nature, but it does not yet imply anything about how human beings should treat each other. For this one needs a further normative premise.²⁴ This contrasts

²¹ I am not claiming to provide a nuanced account of the conception of all those who adhered to it. However, it seems that many earlier thinkers who wrote on dignity agreed on a broad pattern that is different from the *contemporary* paradigm. I shall confine myself to the broad lines.

²² Cf. Cicero, *De Officiis*. Trad. by W. Miller. Cambridge/MA 1913, book I, §§ 105–107: “But it is essential to every inquiry about duty that we keep before our eyes how far superior man is by nature to cattle and other beasts: they have no thought except for sensual pleasure and this they are impelled by every instinct to seek; but man’s mind is nurtured by study and meditation. [...] From this we see that sensual pleasure is quite unworthy of the dignity of man and that we ought to despise it and cast it from us; [...] And if we will only bear in mind the superiority and dignity [*excellentia et dignitas*] of our nature, we shall realize how wrong it is to abandon ourselves to excess and to live in luxury and voluptuousness, and how right it is to live in thrift, self-denial, simplicity, and sobriety.” Cf. also Pöschl: “Der Begriff der Würde”; Dürig, W.: “Dignitas”. In: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*. Ed. by T. Klauser. Stuttgart 1957, vol. 3, 1024–1035; Horstmann, R.-P.: “Menschenwürde”. In: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Ed. by J. Ritter/K. Gründer. Basel 1980, vol. 5, 1124–1127.

²³ Cf. Pöschl: “Der Begriff der Würde”.

²⁴ I shall argue that for Kant the Categorical Imperative is the normative premise. Before him this premise was often a teleological one, according to which one should live according to

with the *contemporary* paradigm, in which dignity is a non-relational value property.

An important second difference is that in the *traditional* pattern of thought there are two stages of dignity. While in the *contemporary* paradigm ‘dignity’ refers to a value human beings possess, and therefore one either has or does not have dignity, in the *traditional* pattern of thought one’s initial dignity can be realized but also wasted.²⁵ On this account everyone has an initial dignity in having certain capacities (e. g. reason, freedom). But only if one makes a proper use of one’s capacities does one fully realize one’s initial dignity. In the *traditional* paradigm there are therefore two stages of elevation, which are both referred to with the term ‘dignity’.

The third difference between the *contemporary* and the *traditional* paradigm I want to emphasize is that, in the *traditional* conception, dignity was said to be connected to *duties* and not rights. Scholars have shown that the concept of rights played a subordinate role until the 17th century.²⁶ In the *traditional* paradigm the duty to make a proper use of one’s reason (or freedom) was often justified with a teleological premise. Because it is reason that distinguishes human beings from animals, one should not live like an animal but use one’s reason. However, a different strategy for justifying duties is to use a principle of right, e. g. Kant’s Categorical Imperative.

A fourth difference between the two paradigms of human dignity is that the *traditional* pattern of thought is primarily concerned with the dignity of *the agent*, and not with the dignity of others. It is a perfectionist framework which expresses the duty to make a proper use of *one’s own* capacities.²⁷

The relevance of these differences lies in the diverging justifications both paradigms require. While in the case of the *contemporary* pattern one has to justify a non-relational value property of human beings, for the *traditional* paradigm one

one’s nature (Cicero), live in the image of God (e. g. Christian thinkers like Leo the Great), or choose a higher level of being (e. g. Pico della Mirandola). Arthur Lovejoy has argued that the view of a hierarchy of being was prominent from Plato up to the 19th century, cf. his: *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*. New York 1961. While one can express this hierarchy in terms of good, ontologically a higher level has only more being, cf. Ricken, Friedo: “Aristotelische Interpretationen zum Traktat *De passionibus animae* (Summa theologiae II 22–48) des Thomas von Aquin”. In: *Die Einheit der Person*. Ed. by M. Thurner. Stuttgart 1998, 137–140. It is not an ontologically distinct property, a view that is often attributed to G. E. Moore and Max Scheler.

²⁵ For a characterisation of the two-fold aspect of the *traditional* paradigm cf. Bruch, Richard: “Die Würde des Menschen in der patristischen und scholastischen Tradition”. In: *Wissen – Glaube – Politik*. Ed. by W. Gruber et al. Graz 1981, 148f.; and Glendon, Mary Ann: “Foundations of Human Rights: The Unfinished Business”. In: *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 44 (1999), 13f.

²⁶ Cf. Tuck, Richard: *Natural Rights Theories. Their Origin and Development*. Cambridge 1979, 9, 11; Schneewind, Jerome: *The Invention of Autonomy. A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge 1998, 93; Glendon: “Human Rights”, 6. According to Tuck the concept of a claim right originated in 12th century Roman law. However, it was then part of property law, and played a subordinate role in morality until the 17th century.

²⁷ Similarly Pöschl: “Der Begriff der Würde”, 55.

needs to support the demand for a certain behavior. For instance, if one reads Kant as putting forward the *traditional* paradigm, one has to justify the Categorical Imperative as the supreme principle one's maxims should not contradict. If one reads him as putting forward the *contemporary* pattern of thought, one has to find an argument for an absolute inner value of human beings.

In the following I shall argue that Kant's conception of dignity is better viewed in light of the *traditional* rather than the *contemporary* paradigm. For Kant human beings are distinguished in nature in virtue of having freedom. Being free, human beings are subject to the Categorical Imperative, which imposes the duty to oneself to universalize one's maxims and thereby to respect others. I shall argue that Kant sometimes uses the *traditional* paradigm of dignity to express the view that one should follow the dictates of morality for its own sake. In the very few passages where dignity and worth appear together, Kant states his view that moral worth is elevated over or *higher than* other forms of value.

Section 2: The traditional conception of dignity in Kant

Before I classify all the passages where Kant uses the term 'dignity', I shall present evidence for my claim that Kant uses the *traditional* paradigm of dignity. This more general evidence, containing clear passages from various writings, will then be supplemented by a close analysis of contested passages in the *Grundlegung* and *Tugendlehre*.

To begin, Kant was familiar with what I have called the *traditional* conception of dignity and mentions it approvingly:

Diese Philosophen [Stoics and others] nahmen ihr allgemeines moralisches Princip von der Würde der menschlichen Natur, der Freiheit (als Unabhängigkeit von der Macht der Neigungen), her; ein besseres und edleres konnten sie auch nicht zum Grunde legen. Die moralischen Gesetze schöpften sie nun unmittelbar aus der auf solche Art allein gesetzgebenden und durch sie schlechthin gebietenden Vernunft, und so war [...] alles ganz richtig angegeben. (RGV, AA 06: 57–58, note²⁸)

Kant, then, both knew and approved of what I have called the *traditional* paradigm of dignity. Moreover, and more importantly, he adhered to the same two-fold conception of dignity himself, as a reflection note from the mid-1770's makes clear: "Die Würde der Menschlichen Natur liegt bloß in der Freyheit [...]. Aber die Würde eines Menschen (Würdigkeit) beruht auf dem Gebrauch der Freyheit [...]." (Refl, AA 19: 181.04–06; cf. Päd, AA 09: 488). All human beings are said to have dignity in virtue of freedom, but only he who uses his freedom in a certain way has the second form of dignity too.

²⁸ For the relation between Kant and the Stoics cf. also Reich, Klaus: "Kant and Greek Ethics II". In: *Mind* 48 (October 1939), 446–463; and Nussbaum, Martha: "Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism". In: *Journal of Political Philosophy* 5 (March 1997), 5. Reich argues that Kant's *Grundlegung* was (in part) a direct response to Cicero's *De Officiis*.

This is the same *traditional* pattern of thought that I introduced in the last section. All human beings are uplifted over the rest of nature in that they have the capacity for freedom. Kant calls freedom the “angeborene Würde des Menschen” (innate dignity of a human being: MS, AA 06: 420.22–23), and he refers to the first stage as “ursprüngliche Würde” (initial dignity: SF, AA 07: 73.03). Having freedom yields a duty (in the first instance to oneself) to make a proper use of one’s freedom. Accordingly, Kant brings up dignity in connection with duties to oneself, as the duty is to realize and preserve one’s initial dignity:

[...] die Pflichten gegen sich selbst. Diese bestehen nicht darin [...]; daß man seine Begierden und Neigungen zu befriedigen suche [...]; sondern, daß der Mensch in seinem Innern eine gewisse Würde habe, die ihn vor allen Geschöpfen adelt, und seine Pflicht ist es, diese Würde der Menschheit in seiner eignen Person nicht zu verleugnen. (Päd, AA 09: 488.30–37)

In Kant’s view human beings are ennobled or elevated over the rest of nature in virtue of being free (i.e. not necessarily being determined by one’s inclinations). This freedom is said to be connected to a duty to use one’s freedom in a proper way, especially to realize and preserve one’s initial dignity. Any demand as to what one should do, I shall argue later, is justified by the Categorical Imperative. What is important to note, however, is that for Kant too one’s initial dignity yields a duty, and that this duty is primarily to oneself. For Kant, the primary duty is to follow the Categorical Imperative and in this way acquire a good will. Without this duty to oneself there would be no duty to others, as duties towards others are expressed by the Categorical Imperative as well.²⁹

Finally, for Kant dignity is not itself a value human beings possess; dignity is rather the sublimity or elevation (*Erhabenheit*) of something over something else, and is contrasted with subordination:

Man kann aus dem kurz vorhergehenden sich es jetzt leicht erklären, wie es zugehe: daß, ob wir gleich unter dem Begriffe von Pflicht uns eine Unterwürfigkeit unter dem Gesetze denken, wir uns dadurch doch zugleich eine gewisse Erhabenheit und *Würde* an derjenigen Person vorstellen, die alle ihre Pflichten erfüllt. Denn so fern ist zwar keine Erhabenheit an ihr, als sie dem moralischen Gesetze *unterworfen* ist, wohl aber so fern sie in Ansehung eben desselben zugleich *gesetzgebend* und nur darum ihm untergeordnet ist. (GMS, AA 04: 439.35–440.05³⁰)

In this passage Kant clearly connects dignity and sublimity. He thus combines all four elements that one can find in the *traditional* conception of dignity: 1.) Human beings are seen as elevated over the rest of nature in virtue of having freedom.

²⁹ Cf. MS, AA 6: 417.25–418.03: “Denn ich kann mich gegen Andere nicht für verbunden erkennen, als nur so fern ich zugleich mich selbst verbinde: weil das Gesetz, kraft dessen ich mich für verbunden achte [the Categorical Imperative], in allen Fällen aus meiner eigenen praktischen Vernunft hervorgeht, durch welche ich genöthigt werde, indem ich zugleich der Nöthigende in Ansehung meiner selbst bin.”

³⁰ For different connotations of Kant’s account of ‘dignity’ as ‘sublimity’ cf. Santeler, Josef: *Die Grundlegung der Menschenwürde bei I. Kant*. Innsbruck 1962, 65–70; and Shell, Susan: “Kant on Human Dignity”. In: *In Defense of Human Dignity*. Ed. by R. Kraynak/G. Tinder South Bend 2003, 60, 73.

2.) 'Dignity' is a two-fold notion that refers to the initial elevation of human beings, as well as to the realized elevation of each individual. 3.) One's initial dignity is said to be connected to a duty to make a proper use of one's freedom (to realize one's dignity). 4.) The duty is in the first instance a duty to oneself.

Reading Kant as adhering to the *traditional* pattern of thought is also supported by his general framework for ethics. I shall point out that, in this framework, the duty to make a proper use of one's freedom is stated by the Categorical Imperative, a principle of the right, that is not itself justified by a value. Indeed, in the passages where Kant explicitly says that he is justifying the Categorical Imperative (the Third Section of the *Grundlegung*, and the second *Kritik*), he neither refers to an absolute value, nor does he mention 'dignity' at all. Rather, as he presents it, it is simply in virtue of being free that human beings are subject to the Categorical Imperative (cf. GMS, AA 04: 446–447). The imperative states a duty of the agent, not a right he can claim. This general framework, in which a principle of right is prior to the good and duties are prior to rights (in the sense of entitlements), is one of the strongest arguments against the view that Kant put forward the *contemporary* conception of dignity. The *contemporary* conception of dignity places the good prior to the right, and rights prior to duties. The absolute value of human beings (the good) generates what is right (to respect others), and this value generates rights (entitlements), from which one's duties towards others can be derived.

The priority of the right to the good in Kant's views can be seen clearly in the following passage from the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, the main place in Kant's works where he discusses the conception of the good: "[D]er Begriff des Guten und Bösen [muß] nicht vor dem moralischen Gesetze [...], sondern nur (wie hier auch geschieht) nach demselben und durch dasselbe bestimmt werden [...]" (KpV, AA 05: 62.37–63.04; cf. GMS, AA 04: 436.01–02). The relevance of this claim for the current topic is twofold. First, since the good is to be determined by the moral law, Kant does not have an account of an unconditional good or absolute inner value human beings as such possess independently of being morally good.³¹ This is confirmed by scholars who examine Kant's discussion of absolute value at the beginning of the *Grundlegung*. They point out that absolute worth is not a name for a non-relational property but rather refers to a prescription of what one *should* value³², or an account of what one *would* value if one were fully governed by reason.³³ If absolute value is not a non-relational property for Kant, but a prescription, then 'dignity' cannot be the name for an absolute value as such a property.

³¹ It is important to note that the preceding passage is not merely about goods one might pursue, but likewise rules out metaphysical accounts of the good as the basis of the moral law; cf. KpV, AA 05: 64.15–22, and Pieper, Annemarie: "Zweites Hauptstück (57–71)". In: *Immanuel Kant. Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. Ed. by O. Höffe. Berlin 2002, 117f.

³² Cf. Ross: *Kant's Ethical Theory*, 50f.; and Hill, Thomas: "Treating Criminals as Ends in Themselves". In: *Annual Review of Law and Ethics* 11 (2003), 19.

³³ Cf. Hill: *Dignity and Practical Reason*, 48; and Dean, Richard: "Cummiskey's Kantian Consequentialism". In: *Utilitas* 12 (2000), 34.

Secondly, if the good is to be determined by the moral law, then Kant does not adhere to the *contemporary* paradigm that places the good prior to the right (e. g. the moral law).

Similarly, Kant does not ground rights on an absolute value, but he clearly states that, in the framework of his ethics, duties (as determined by the Categorical Imperative) are prior to rights. This comes out in the following passage from the *Rechtslehre*:

Warum wird aber die Sittenlehre (Moral) gewöhnlich (namentlich vom Cicero) die Lehre von den *Pflichten* und nicht auch von den *Rechten* betitelt? [...] – Der Grund ist dieser: Wir kennen unsere eigene Freiheit (von der alle moralische Gesetze, mithin auch alle Rechte sowohl als Pflichten ausgehen) nur durch den *moralischen Imperativ*, welcher ein pflichtgebietender Satz ist, aus welchem nachher das Vermögen, andere zu verpflichten, d. i. der Begriff des Rechts, entwickelt werden kann. (MS, 06: 239.13–21)

According to Kant, someone can claim a right in reminding the agent of his duty to respect him. This general framework of ethics, in which the Categorical Imperative as a principle of right is the normative justification for the good and for rights, further supports my interpretation of Kant as conforming to a *traditional* paradigm of dignity. In the next section I shall classify all the occurrences of dignity in Kant's texts. Afterwards I shall look at the *Grundlegung* and *Tugendlehre* to argue that, for Kant, dignity is not a non-relational value property human beings possess.

Section 3: The appearance of 'dignity' in Kant's works

In his published writings Kant uses the term 'dignity' 111 times.³⁴ In addition, there is one lecture³⁵ and two reflection notes³⁶ that are helpful in clarifying Kant's view of dignity. In his published works the use of 'dignity' is spread over 18 writings. The works in which the word is used most often are (ordered by the number of appearances): the *Tugendlehre* (21 times), the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (17 times), *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (eleven times), and the *Pädagogik* (ten times).³⁷

³⁴ See *Kant-Konkordanz*. Ed. by Wilhelm Lütterfelds et al. Hildesheim 1995, vol. 9, 306–308. Passage RGV, AA 06: 58.25 is mistakenly listed there and not counted here. In addition, I counted four occurrences where Kant talks about "Menschenwürde" (human dignity) in contrast to the more common "Würde der Menschheit" (dignity of humanity). The four passages are: MS, AA 06: 429.24, 436.29, 465.17, and Anth, 07: 295.19.

³⁵ NRFeyer, AA 27:1319–1322.

³⁶ Refl 6856, AA 19:181; Refl 7305, AA 19:307.

³⁷ The others are: *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen* (ten times); *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (seven times); *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (six times); *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (five times); *Rechtslehre* (five times); *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (five times); *Zum ewigen Frieden* (four times); *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (three times); *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes* (twice);

Throughout different stages of his career and throughout writings on different subjects Kant explicitly equates dignity with sublimity (*Erhabenheit*) as (the highest form of) elevation.³⁸ The elevation he has in mind is sometimes that indicated by the *archaic* conception of dignity, and sometimes that indicated by the *traditional* conception I distinguished in Section 1. He clearly uses the *archaic* conception when – for instance – he talks about “königliche Würde” (Anth, AA 07: 131.09), the “Würde eines Monarchen” (SF, AA 07: 19.26), the “Würde der Regenten” and “eines Ministers” (ZeF, AA 08: 344.06–08). In these passages Kant uses ‘dignity’ in the *archaic* sense to indicate some aspect of rank, with which he sometimes equates it explicitly (so in: MS, AA 06: 328.33, 468.09; Anth, AA 07: 127.09). In this exclusive sense, by which Kant points out the elevation of one member of a class, he also talks about the “Würde der Philosophie” (KrV, B 86; KrV, A 319; cf. KrV, B 429), the “Würde des Philosophen” (Log, AA 09: 26.14), the “Würde der Mathematik” (KrV, B 492), and the “Würde des Lehrers” (RGV, AA 06: 162.19). As these usages all rank one member of a group over others, I have counted them as instances of the *archaic* conception of dignity (even if they do not refer to the rank of one human being in society, as the Roman conception did). All in all, he uses the *archaic* conception of dignity 39 times.³⁹

In contrast to the exclusive and hierarchical *archaic* usage of dignity, Kant often talks about the dignity of *all* human beings, or – as he often puts it – the “Würde der Menschheit”⁴⁰ (dignity of humanity). Kant says that the dignity of humanity consists in freedom as the capacity to act independently of inclinations (cf. RGV, AA 06: 57.27, 183.24, 420.22; SF, AA 07: 73.03; WA, AA 08: 42.01; Refl, AA 19: 181; NRFeyer, AA 27: 1319–1322). Because freedom in this sense is also the capacity to act morally, Kant also says that the dignity of humanity consists in the capacity to

Logik (twice); *Versuch, den Begriff der negativen Größen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen* (once); *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (once); *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee* (once); *Kraus' Recension von Ulrich's Eleutheriologie* (once).

³⁸ Cf. BDG, AA 02: 117.35, 212.01, 215.20, 241.18; GMS, AA 04: 425.28, 440.01; KpV, AA 05: 71.21; MS, AA 06: 435.20; Log, AA 09: 30.12. Sometimes Kant expresses this as something being below someone's dignity, e.g. in: KrV, B 658; KU, AA 05: 327.14; KU, AA 06: 113.26, 327.27; Päd, AA 09: 489.11. Cf. also GMS, AA 04: 438.13 and MS, AA 06: 420.16–17, where he elucidates dignity as a prerogative. For a specification of Kant's usage of ‘sublimity’ see esp. KU, AA 05: 248.05 and 250.05; cf. also note 5 above.

³⁹ In addition to the 13 passages cited see: BDG, AA 02: 117.35, 123.06, 198.02, 212.01, 215.20; KrV, B 658, 879; KrV, A 243; KpV, AA 05: 25.06, 71.21; KU, AA 05: 327.14, 336.10; RGV, 06: 113.26, 123.16, 165.25, 327.27, 329.33, 36, 363.27, 467.26; SF, AA 07: 19.18, 34.10, 52.22; Anth, AA 07: 316.05; ZeF, AA 08: 365.14, 368.27.

⁴⁰ Literally in: GMS, AA 04: 439.04, 440.11; KU, AA 05: 273.14; RGV, AA 06: 80.18, 183.24, 420.16, 429.16, 436.16, 29, 449.29, 459.23, 462.30; Päd, AA 09: 488.36, 489.01, 07, 11, 34; but see also: GSE, AA 02: 212.11, 217.17, 219.11, 221.29; GMS, AA 04: 435.08, 438.13; KpV, AA 05: 88.07, 152.28; RGV, AA 06: 57.27, 420.22, 429.24, 435.02, 19, 436.12, 462.13, 21, 24, 465.17; SF, AA 07: 58.20, 73.03; WA, AA 08: 42.01, 454.20; Päd, AA 09: 488.35, 489.08.

act morally (cf. GMS, AA 04: 435.08, 440.11; SF, AA 07: 58.20). Kant specifies what he means by dignity in this context by saying that the capacity to act morally is a prerogative human beings have over the rest of nature (cf. GMS, AA 04: 438.13; MS, AA 06: 420.17, 434–435; Päd, AA 09: 488.36). Interestingly, in these passages he does not refer to worth or value, but he does call human dignity “angebör[n]en” (MS, AA 06: 420.22) and “unverlierbar[e]” (inalienable: MS, AA 06: 436.12). In accordance with Kant I will call this usage of dignity the “ursprüngliche Würde” (initial dignity: SF, AA 07: 73.03), as it expresses the first stage of what I have called the *traditional* pattern of thought. All in all he uses dignity in this sense 41 times throughout his published writings.⁴¹

In addition, Kant often speaks of dignity in relation to morality and morally good behavior in a way that suggests the realized dignity in the *traditional* paradigm. In this sense Kant talks about the “Würde der Tugend” (GSE, AA 02: 216.29; MS, AA 06: 483.03), the dignity of the concept of duty (cf. RGV, AA 06: 23.23–24), the dignity of the moral law (cf. KpV, AA 05: 147.17–18, MS, AA 06: 464.18), or the “Erhabenheit und Würde an derjenigen Person [...], die alle ihre Pflichten erfüllt” (GMS, AA 04: 440.01–02). Kant uses ‘dignity’ in the realized sense especially to express the claim that morality should be valued above all else. Accordingly, it is in passages where Kant talks about the realized sense that ‘dignity’ appears together with ‘worth’ (cf. esp. GMS, AA 04: 435.04–05, MS, AA 06: 435.02 and below). Morality is said to have an elevated worth because of its independence from inclinations. Kant says: “daß es um desto mehr die Erhabenheit und innere Würde des Gebots in einer Pflicht beweiset, je weniger die subjectiven Ursachen dafür, je mehr sie dagegen sind” (GMS, AA 04: 425.27–29). Counted together there are 31 passages that connect dignity to morality.⁴²

I claim that – setting aside passages where Kant uses the *archaic* conception of dignity – his usage of ‘dignity’ always conforms to the *traditional* paradigm of dignity. The 41 passages in which Kant talks about the dignity of *all* human beings refer to the first stage of the *traditional* conception, i.e. a capacity that elevates human beings over the rest of nature. The 31 times when Kant refers to dignity in relation to morality, he emphasizes the duty to make a certain use of one’s freedom, i.e. to realize one’s dignity fully.

What is also noteworthy about Kant’s usages of dignity is that, out of 111 occurrences, only eight relate dignity to worth or value (*Worth*).⁴³ As these passages are the source of the claim in the literature that Kant adheres to the *contemporary* para-

⁴¹ See footnote 40.

⁴² In addition to the seven cited cf. GSE, AA 02: 227.35, 241.18, 450.32; GMS, AA 04: 405.17, 411.02, 13, 434.29, 32, 34, 435.04, 25, 436.03, 06, 442.29; RGV, AA 06: 23.19, 114.11, 467.25; Anth, AA 07: 295.19, 22; MpVT, AA 08: 257.27; Log, AA 09: 30.12, Päd, AA 09: 490.01, 31, 493.04.

⁴³ GMS, AA 04: 435.04, 435.25, 436.03; GMS, AA 06: 435.02, 436.10–12, 462.12–13; Anth, AA 07: 295.19; cf. KrV, B 490 03: 322.09.

digm of dignity⁴⁴, I shall now have a closer look at them. In the remainder of this paper I shall argue that even those passages are in fact in line with the *traditional* paradigm of dignity.

Section 4: Dignity and Absolute Worth

Dignity in the *Grundlegung*

In the following I shall have a close look at those passages in the *Grundlegung* and *Tugendlehre* that seem to link dignity and worth, because they are the ones most likely to be seen as a challenge to the interpretation of Kant I have advanced. I shall argue that, if one closely looks at the content and context of these passages, one can see that Kant even here adheres to the *traditional* pattern of thought. I shall start out with the *Grundlegung*.

All in all in the *Grundlegung* Kant uses the term 'dignity' only 17 times. What is striking is that Kant does not use the term at all where one would most expect it if one reads Kant as adhering to the *contemporary* paradigm. He neither uses the term in connection with the Formula of Humanity and the respect one owes to others (cf. *GMS*, AA 04: 426–431), nor where he justifies his moral views in the Third Section of the *Grundlegung*. This is striking; if Kant saw dignity as his "most fundamental value"⁴⁵, and as a value that is the foundation even of the Categorical Imperative⁴⁶, one would expect a sustained treatment of the issue for instance in the Third Section of the *Grundlegung* (*GMS*, AA 04: 446–463), where Kant aims to justify the Categorical Imperative.⁴⁷ However, Kant neither uses the term 'dignity' in the Third Section, nor does he present an argument for an absolute value of human beings there.⁴⁸

Instead, eight occurrences of 'dignity' appear in a peripheral addition to the Formulas of Autonomy and Kingdom of Ends (see *GMS*, AA 04: 434.20–436.07). He then uses the term four times in a summary of his argument for this formula (see *GMS*, AA 04: 438.08–440.13). In addition, there are five isolated occurrences scattered throughout the *Grundlegung* that clearly do not deal with *human* dignity at all, but the elevation of morality over other forms of behavior (see *GMS*, AA 04: 405.17, 411.02 411.13, 425.28, 442.29). As the three passages in which Kant relates dignity to worth appear in the addendum to the Formula of Autonomy, I shall

⁴⁴ For references see again note 2 above.

⁴⁵ Wood: "Kant on Duties", 189.

⁴⁶ See Guyer: *Kant on Freedom*, 150–157.

⁴⁷ Cf. e.g. *GMS*, AA 04: 431.32–34 and 445.01–02.

⁴⁸ In the Third Section Kant uses the phrase 'inner worth' once (see *GMS*, AA 04: 454.37), where it is clearly tied to morality and not said to be a value of all human beings; and he uses the phrase 'absolute worth' three times in connection with the Formula of Humanity (cf. *GMS*, AA 04: 428.04, 15, 30), where, however, it receives only passing mention.

here go through the one and a half pages of the addendum which contain eight occurrences of dignity. In analyzing the addendum I shall refer to the summary of the argument as well.

I shall argue, to anticipate, that the addendum answers a question about moral motivation in the widest sense. The question is why one should abide by the Categorical Imperative in its Formula of Autonomy, a formula that emphasizes the exclusion of all interest from moral motivation (cf. *GMS*, AA 04: 431.25–432.04). Kant's answer is that one should abide by the Categorical Imperative because following the imperative, that is morality, has an elevated worth. Rather than putting forward the *contemporary* paradigm of dignity, I argue, Kant repeats familiar claims of the *Grundlegung*. Only a morally good will can have an unconditional worth. 'Dignity' expresses the sublimity of morality, in that this worth is *higher* than or to be preferred over other worth: Morality, and not the objects of one's inclinations, should be sought above all else.

The context of the passage

In more detail: The passage appears at the end of Kant's discussion of the Formula of Autonomy and the Formula of Kingdom of Ends. In his discussion Kant switches back and forth between both formulas. Kant introduces the Formula of Autonomy, namely "[die] Idee des Willens eines jeden vernünftigen Wesens als *allgemein-gesetzgebenden Willens*" (*GMS*, AA 04: 432.03–04)⁴⁹, in order to make explicit the categorical nature of the Categorical Imperative, or to indicate "die Los-sagung von allem Interesse beim Wollen aus Pflicht [...] in dem Imperativ selbst" (*GMS*, AA 04: 431.35–37).⁵⁰ The idea of the Formula of Autonomy, Kant goes on, that every rational being should give universal law, leads to the idea of a kingdom of ends. A kingdom of ends is "die systematische Verbindung verschiedener vernünftiger Wesen durch gemeinschaftliche Gesetze" (*GMS*, AA 04: 433.17–18). Such a kingdom is only an ideal, but it would come actually into existence if everyone were to act on the Categorical Imperative (cf. *GMS*, AA 04: 438.29–32).⁵¹

⁴⁹ At this point Kant does not state the Formula of Autonomy in an imperative form.

⁵⁰ The requirement to give universal law makes an imperative categorical, that is not dependent upon something else one wants (by inclination), in that a *universal* or supreme lawgiver cannot be governed by inclinations: "denn ein solcher abhängender Wille würde selbst noch eines andern Gesetzes bedürfen, welches das Interesse seiner Selbstliebe auf die Bedingung einer Gültigkeit zum allgemeinen Gesetz einschränkte." (*GMS*, AA 04: 432.08–11.) Behind Kant's argument is the view that all inclinations propel to self-love, cf. *KpV*, AA 05: 22–25.

⁵¹ In his first discussion of the kingdom of ends Kant likewise does not state the formula. Only in a repetition of his argument he states: "Demnach muß ein jedes vernünftige Wesen so handeln, als ob es durch seine Maximen jederzeit ein gesetzgebendes Glied im allgemeinen Reiche der Zwecke wäre." (*GMS*, AA 04: 438.18–21.)

He concludes: "Moralität besteht also in der Beziehung aller Handlung auf die Gesetzgebung, dadurch allein ein Reich der Zwecke möglich ist" (GMS, AA 04: 434.07–08). Kant reformulates the requirement of the kingdom of ends as the requirement of the Formula of Autonomy, because the requirement to universalize must be able to arise from an agent's will without looking at the scope of concern of the requirement.⁵² For the first time he spells out the Formula of Autonomy thus: "[Handle] nur so, daß der Wille durch seine Maxime sich selbst zugleich als allgemein gesetzgebend betrachten könne" (GMS, AA 04: 434.12–14). It is to this law that the passage about dignity refers.

The passage

What is important to note in reading the passage that contains the eight references to dignity is that it is an addendum to the Formula of Autonomy, and that this formula excludes inclinations as one's proper moral motivation. The addendum is a very dense and complicated passage. This is because it tries to link four key concepts, each of which is expressed differently over the one and a half pages. The four concepts are: 'autonomy', 'morality', 'dignity', and 'worth'. Those concepts are linked in the claim that a morally good person abides by the Formula of Autonomy (or is autonomous) because morality has an elevated worth.

Given the complicated character of the passage, I shall first lay out why the passage should be read as an instance of the *traditional* paradigm if one follows it closely in its context. In order not to complicate matters further, I shall not emphasize at each junction why the passage is not an instance of the *contemporary* pattern of thought. However, after I have gone through the whole one-and-a-half pages I shall address in a separate discussion the objection that the appearance of 'worth' makes the *Grundlegung* passage an example of the *contemporary* paradigm of dignity. In that discussion I shall point out, first, that for Kant the good is dependent upon the right; second, that it is not humanity as such that has an absolute inner worth, but morality; and, third, that Kant does not conceive of worth as a non-relational property.

The passage starts:

[Occurrence 1:] Die praktische Nothwendigkeit nach diesem Princip zu handeln, [...] beruht gar nicht auf Gefühlen, Antrieben und Neigungen [...]. Die Vernunft bezieht also jede Maxime [...] auf jeden anderen Willen [...] nicht um irgend eines andern praktischen Bewegungsgrundes oder künftigen Vortheils willen, sondern aus der Idee der *Würde* eines vernünftigen Wesens, das keinem Gesetze gehorcht als dem, das es zugleich selbst giebt. (GMS, AA 04: 434.20–30⁵³)

⁵² Accordingly, Paton classifies the Formula of Kingdom of Ends as a sub-formula of the Formula of Autonomy, see his: *Categorical Imperative*, 129. The scope of concern emphasizes the receiving end of one's duty, not who has duties, cf. Gibbard: "Morality as Consistency", 151.

⁵³ I have put "*Würde*" in italics in this and the following quotations.

The first occurrence links the concepts of ‘autonomy’, ‘morality’ and ‘dignity’. A morally good being does not abide by the Formula of Autonomy out of any inclination or thought about his advantage, but from the idea of the dignity (or sublimity) of a morally good being, that is a being who abides by the Formula of Autonomy, or – as the last phrase puts it – “das keinem Gesetze gehorcht als dem, das es zugleich selbst giebt”. As the summary of the argument later in the *Grundlegung* indicates, Kant has the dignity of *the agent’s own* morally good will in mind.⁵⁴ Although it is a common theme throughout Kant’s ethical writings that the idea of the dignity or sublimity of one’s own morally good will is a proper moral motive⁵⁵, one has to be careful to construe this thought in the proper way. To be morally good, a person could not be moved by any liking of himself as a morally good person or any thoughts about the advantages that it might yield in the eyes of others (cf. e.g. GMS, AA 04: 397.19–32). One could express this requirement more adequately by saying that a morally good person abides by the Formula of Autonomy because of the dignity of morality. It is the dignity of morality, then, that accounts for the practical necessity to abide by the Formula of Autonomy.

In the next two occurrences Kant elucidates dignity as elevation:

[Occurrences 2 & 3:] Im Reiche der Zwecke hat alles entweder einen *Preis*, oder eine *Würde*. Was einen Preis hat, an dessen Stelle kann auch etwas anderes als *Äquivalent* gesetzt werden; was dagegen über allen Preis erhaben ist, mithin kein *Äquivalent* verstatet, das hat eine *Würde*. (GMS, AA 04: 434.31–34)

What these occurrences do is to elucidate dignity as sublimity or the highest form of elevation. In this passage Kant talks about the special case in which something is elevated over things to which a price can be assigned, and which can be traded for other things of equal value. What is elevated above price and what has an *elevated* worth is morality, as the next occurrences make clear:

[Occurrences 4 & 5:] Was sich auf die allgemeinen menschlichen Neigungen und Bedürfnisse bezieht, hat einen *Marktpreis*; [...] das aber, was die Bedingung ausmacht, unter der allein etwas Zweck an sich selbst sein kann, hat nicht bloß einen relativen Werth, d. i. einen Preis, sondern einen innern Werth, d. i. *Würde*.

Nun ist Moralität die Bedingung, unter der allein ein vernünftiges Wesen Zweck an sich selbst sein kann [...]. Also ist Sittlichkeit und die Menschheit, so fern sie derselben fähig ist, dasjenige, was allein *Würde* hat. (GMS, AA 04: 434.35–435.09)

These occurrences link the concepts of ‘morality’, ‘dignity’ and ‘worth’. It is morality that has an inner worth. Kant uses ‘inner’ to express the view that moral worth is not merely relative to one’s inclinations.⁵⁶ Given his usage of worth as what one should value (see Section 2 above), what he is saying is that one should value

⁵⁴ See GMS, AA 04: 440.07–10 (my emphasis): “*Unser eigener Wille*, so fern er nur unter der Bedingung einer durch seine Maximen möglichen allgemeinen Gesetzgebung handeln würde, dieser uns mögliche Wille in der Idee ist der eigentliche Gegenstand der Achtung.”

⁵⁵ Cf. e.g. MS, AA 06: 483, 459; KpV, AA 05: 152; RGV, AA 06: 183; SF, AA 07: 58.

⁵⁶ Cf. also KrV A 324–325/B 381–382; and Löhner: *Menschliche Würde*, 35. For Kant’s usage of ‘relative worth’ cf. GMS, AA 04: 428.

morality whether one has an inclination to do so or not. It is in this respect that moral worth is elevated over relative worth. Accordingly, the phrase “inner[er] Werth, d. i. *Würde*” should not be read as a definition of ‘dignity’, but as a specification of ‘inner’ as elevated. The whole sentence can be paraphrased as follows: Morality has not just a subordinate relative value (a price), but an *elevated* inner worth (a dignity in worth). ‘Dignity’ is used to express that moral worth is *higher than* other worth.⁵⁷ While morality has dignity in the sense that it should be sought above all else, humanity has dignity in the sense of being elevated over the rest of nature in being capable of morality (cf. GMS, AA 04: 438.12–13). In the *traditional* paradigm these are two stages of elevation or dignity. The initial elevation of humanity is only realized if one makes a proper use of one’s moral capacity. At this part of the *Grundlegung* Kant is mainly concerned with realized dignity, a morally good will, as the next occurrence makes clear:

[Occurrence 6:] Geschicklichkeit und Fleiß im Arbeiten haben einen Marktpreis; [...] Treue im Versprechen, Wohlwollen aus Grundsätzen (nicht aus Instinct) haben einen innern Werth. [...] Diese Handlungen [...] stellen den Willen, der sie ausübt, als Gegenstand einer unmittelbaren Achtung dar [...]. Diese Schätzung giebt also den Werth einer solchen Denckungsart als *Würde* zu erkennen und setzt sie über allen Preis unendlich weg [...]. (GMS, AA 04: 435.09–28)

This occurrence of dignity reiterates Kant’s claim that morality has a sublimity in that it should be esteemed. Here he only formulates his claim in terms of a morally good will, thereby bringing it closer to the famous opening sentence of the First Section of the *Grundlegung* – that only a good will could be called unconditionally good (cf. GMS, AA 04: 393.05–07). Kant says that it is a morally good cast of mind that has inner worth, and is therefore elevated over other talents and casts of mind. In accordance with the *traditional* paradigm, this is what the realized dignity of a morally good person consists in.

The next occurrences specify why morality is said to have an elevated worth, and in doing so they link autonomy back to the elevated worth of morality:

[Occurrences 7 & 8:] Und was ist es denn nun, was die sittlich gute Gesinnung oder die Tugend berechtigt, so hohe Ansprüche zu machen? Es ist nichts Geringeres als der *Antheil*, den sie dem vernünftigen Wesen *an der allgemeinen Gesetzgebung* verschafft [...]. Denn es hat nichts einen Werth als den, welchen ihm das Gesetz bestimmt. Die Gesetzgebung selbst aber, die allen Werth bestimmt, muß eben darum eine *Würde*, d. i. unbedingten, unvergleichbaren Werth⁵⁸, haben [...]. *Autonomie* ist also der Grund der *Würde* der menschlichen und jeder vernünftigen Natur. (GMS, AA 04: 435.29–436.07)

⁵⁷ However, if ‘inner value’ just means the prescription to value something unconditionally, is dignity not an inner value insofar as the term has the connotation of being worthy of esteem? Does Kant not mean the same thing in saying that something should be valued and that it is worthy to be valued? However, the requirement to value something unconditionally is not a necessary connotation of Kant’s usage of ‘dignity’, e.g. when he speaks of the dignity of mathematics or a teacher.

⁵⁸ Here too the phrase “*Würde*, d. i. unbedingten, unvergleichbaren Werth” does not have to be read as a definition of ‘dignity.’ It should be read as saying: ‘morality has an elevated position (dignity), in that it should be valued above all else (it has an incomparable worth).’

These occurrences tie the claim that morality has an elevated worth back to the original question of why a morally good person abides by the Formula of Autonomy. They connect morality, dignity, and worth to autonomy, or – as Kant shortens it here – lawgiving.⁵⁹ Kant explains the elevated worth of morality as follows: The moral law as a principle of right is prior to the good and determines it: The (moral) law determines all (moral) worth. If the law determines all (moral) worth, then giving the law to oneself and following it (i. e. being morally good) must have the elevated worth of morality. This explanation is not an argument for why the law is prior, or why morality has an elevated worth. Those arguments are given in the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* and the First Section of the *Grundlegung*. Rather the explanation unfolds the link between different concepts. Kant concludes in saying that autonomy – as abiding by the Formula of Autonomy – is the ground of the dignity (as the realized elevation) of human beings.

What makes the one-and-a-half pages on dignity in the *Grundlegung* so complicated is that they tie together four concepts ('autonomy', 'morality', 'dignity', 'worth') that are each expressed differently. Unfolding this complicated structure yields an instance of the *traditional* paradigm of thought. Kant's claim in the whole addendum to the Formula of Autonomy is that morality is to be valued above all else. This answers the question of why a morally good person abides by the Formula of Autonomy. The person does so not from any advantage he might hope to achieve for his inclinations, but from the idea of the elevated standing of moral worth (i. e. its dignity). These are familiar claims Kant makes throughout the *Grundlegung*, and there is no need for him to argue for them at this point. Kant's key passage on dignity in the *Grundlegung* can therefore very well be explained as adhering to the *traditional* paradigm of dignity.

Dignity as a Value

Now that I have laid out how the *Grundlegung* passage suggests that Kant uses the *traditional* paradigm of dignity, it is important also to address directly the negative claim that he does not use the *contemporary* pattern of thought. This is because the appearance of phrases like: "inner[er] Werth, d. i. *Würde*" (occurrence 4), or: "Werth [...] als *Würde* zu erkennen" (6), or: "*Würde*, d. i. unbedingten, unvergleichbaren Werth" (7) might be read as an instance of the *contemporary* paradigm. If dignity is inner worth, and humanity has dignity (5), then humanity has inner worth, and it is a short step to saying that one should respect humanity because it has an inner worth.

However, this is not what Kant actually says, and it is important to keep in mind three points I have stressed: First, for Kant the good is dependent upon the right; second, it is not humanity that has an inner worth, but *morality*; and third, Kant does not conceive of worth as a non-relational property.

⁵⁹ This is how Kant characterizes autonomy, cf. GMS, AA 04: 431.19–433.11.

On the first point, Kant makes clear also in the *Grundlegung* that the good is dependent upon the right: “Denn es hat nichts einen Werth als den, welchen ihm das Gesetz bestimmt.” (GMS, AA 04: 436.01–02) There is therefore no independent worth that could ground the requirement to respect others, but for Kant the relationship is the other way around: One should respect others because it is commanded by the Categorical Imperative in the Formula of Humanity. Kant says that the requirement to universalize one’s maxim is “im Grunde einerlei” as the requirement to respect others (see GMS, AA 04: 437–438). For the requirement to universalize one’s maxim demands that one reject a maxim that could not spring from the will of the affected subject (since that would mean that it could not be universalized). However, this requirement is the same as the Formula of Humanity. A rational being is

[...] keiner Absicht zu unterwerfen, die nicht nach einem Gesetze, welches aus dem Willen des leidenden Subjects selbst entspringen könnte, möglich ist; also dieses niemals bloß als Mittel, sondern zugleich selbst als Zweck zu gebrauchen. (KpV, AA 05: 87.24–27⁶⁰)

It is in virtue of the moral law – and not because of an inner worth of human beings – that one should respect them.⁶¹

This is further supported, second, by the fact that, in the *Grundlegung* and elsewhere, Kant ties absolute inner worth (almost) exclusively to morality and not to human beings as such.⁶² Throughout his works Kant repeats the claim that the inner or absolute worth of human beings is one that the human being can only give himself in being morally good:

[...] der Werth, welchen er allein sich selbst geben kann, und welcher in dem besteht, was er thut, wie und nach welchen Principien er nicht als Naturglied, sondern in der *Freiheit* seines Begehrungsvermögens handelt; d. h. ein guter Wille ist dasjenige, wodurch sein Dasein allein einen absoluten Werth [...] haben kann. (KU, AA 05: 443.07–13)

This is a clear expression of a recurrent thought in Kant’s writings.⁶³ The absolute worth of human beings is secondary to and depends upon a morally good will. This does not mean that one can treat morally bad human beings in an inhumane way – Kant claims that even a criminal deserves respect⁶⁴ – but it emphasizes again that

⁶⁰ Cf. GMS, AA 04:437:34–438.07.

⁶¹ For a fuller defense of this claim see my: “Dignity and the Formula of Humanity”. Cf. also Ebbinghaus, Julius: “Die Formeln des Kategorischen Imperativs und die Ableitung inhaltlich bestimmter Pflichten”. In his: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Bonn 1988, vol. 2, 216; Sullivan, Roger: *Immanuel Kant’s Moral Theory*. Cambridge 1989, 193 ff.; O’Neill: *Constructions of Reason*, ch. 7.

⁶² Cf. also Mulholland, Leslie: *Kant’s System of Rights*. New York 1990, 104. Two rare exceptions, GMS, AA 04: 428.04 and MS, AA 06: 462.13, are discussed at separate places below.

⁶³ See e. g. GMS, AA 04: 439, 449–450, 454; KpV, AA 05: 110–111, 147–148; KU, AA 05: 208–209. Matthew Caswell argues that Kant’s conception of evil rules out an absolute value humanity would have as such, cf. his: “The Value of Humanity and Kant’s Conception of Evil”. In: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.4 (2006), 635–662.

⁶⁴ Cf. Kant: MS, AA 06: 463.12–13; see Hill: *Dignity and Practical Reason*, 53; Wood: *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, 132–139.

Kant's ethics is not built upon an inner or unconditional worth of human beings as its foundation, and that for Kant rights are not grounded on a value human beings possess (cf. again MS, AA 06: 239.13–21).

Kant therefore neither grounds the requirement to respect others on an absolute inner value all human beings possess, nor does he advance such a value. This is further supported, third, by Kant's conception of worth. Kant does not give a positive specification of worth as a non-relational property.⁶⁵ In the *Grundlegung* passage on dignity – as elsewhere⁶⁶ – Kant specifies inner worth merely negatively. Kant says that inner worth is “über allen Preis *erhaben*”, admits of “kein Äquivalent” (occurrence 3), “hat *nicht* bloß einen relativen Werth” (4), but an “*unbedingten, unvergleichbaren Werth*” (7; all emphasis mine). I agree with scholars who say that ‘inner worth’ is merely a different expression for what one *should* value independently of its usefulness⁶⁷, or something that one *would* value if one were fully governed by reason.⁶⁸

If ‘worth’ refers to a prescription to value something rather than a non-relational property, and if other human beings should be respected, then Kant could say that all human beings have worth in this sense.⁶⁹ However, because this sense of ‘worth’ is in line with the *traditional* pattern of thought, I do not read Kant as putting forward the *contemporary* pattern of thought even in the most suggestive passages of the *Grundlegung*.

Tugendlehre

Even if one grants that Kant does not use the *contemporary* paradigm in the *Grundlegung*, one could argue that Kant uses it in the *Tugendlehre* (1797).⁷⁰ In the *Tugendlehre* Kant uses ‘dignity’ 21 times. Only three out of those relate dignity to worth. It is in those three usages that one would expect to find an endorsement of the *contemporary* paradigm of dignity. In the following I shall argue that, if one takes the context of those passages into account, they should be read as conforming to the *traditional* paradigm of dignity.

The first passage occurs in Kant's discussion of duties towards self:

⁶⁵ Kant does not include on his list of candidates for the good the moral realist conception often attributed to G. E. Moore or Max Scheler, cf. again KpV, AA 05: 64.15–22.

⁶⁶ See Löhner: *Menschliche Würde*, 36; cf. Santeler: *Menschenwürde bei I. Kant*, 61; cf. Schwartländer, Johannes: *Der Mensch ist Person*. Stuttgart 1968, 183.

⁶⁷ Cf. again Ross: *Kant's Ethical Theory*, 50f.; and Hill: “Treating Criminals as Ends”, 19.

⁶⁸ Cf. once more Hill: *Dignity and Practical Reason*, 48; Dean: “Cummiskey's Kantian Consequentialism”, 34; cf. GMS, AA 04: 414, 449, 454.

⁶⁹ This is how I read the appearance of ‘absolute worth’ in GMS, AA 04: 428; see my: “Dignity and the Formula of Humanity”.

⁷⁰ Stephen Darwall seems to accept that the *Grundlegung* follows what I call the *traditional* paradigm, but claims that the *Tugendlehre* does not, cf. his: *The Second-Person Standpoint*. Cambridge/MA 2006, 121, note 4.

Der Mensch im System der Natur (*homo phaenomenon, animal rationale*) ist ein Wesen von geringer Bedeutung [...]. Allein der Mensch, als *Person* betrachtet, d. i. als Subject einer moralisch-praktischen Vernunft, ist über allen Preis erhaben; denn als ein solcher (*homo noumenon*) ist er nicht blos als Mittel zu anderer ihren, ja selbst seinen eigenen Zwecken, sondern als Zweck an sich selbst zu schätzen, d. i. er besitzt eine Würde (einen absoluten innern Werth), wodurch er allen andern vernünftigen Weltwesen *Achtung* für ihn abnöthigt, sich mit jedem Andern dieser Art messen und auf den Fuß der Gleichheit schätzen kann. (MS, AA 06: 434.22–435.05)

This passage can be read as an example of the *contemporary* conception of dignity. On this reading a human being has an inherent value property (“einen absoluten innern Werth”) which ontologically is part of a ‘noumenal world’ (“*homo noumenon*”) that exists over and above the phenomenal world one knows from experience.⁷¹ It is this value property that exacts respect from others, and because of which one can claim rights. The *Tugendlehre* does not contain the arguments to support such a view, and it is doubtful that Kant ever provides one.⁷² Here I shall point out that the context and content speak for the *traditional* conception of dignity.

The above passage appears in a section “Von der Kriecherei” (MS, AA 06: 434.20). The context of the passage is accordingly a discussion of a duty to oneself against servility or false humility. What Kant indicates in this passage is that one has a duty not to regard oneself as (morally) inferior to other people. The reason is that “als Subject einer moralisch-praktischen Vernunft” – that is as a moral being – one can have an inner worth and exact respect from oneself and others. The moral aspect of oneself has dignity or is elevated over the merely natural aspect of oneself.

This reading that supports the *traditional* paradigm of dignity is confirmed as the section on servility continues. Kant says in the next paragraph:

[...] so kann seine Geringfähigkeit als *Thiermensch* dem Bewußtsein seiner Würde als *Vernunftmensch* nicht Abbruch thun, und er soll die moralische Selbstschätzung in Betracht der letzteren nicht verlügen [...]. (MS, AA 06: 435.13–16)

The capacity to partake in morality is the prerogative or elevation human beings have over the rest of nature. The agent should revere this and aim to be morally good. As it is moral goodness that alone has unconditional worth, the individual should not lower himself in falling into a servile spirit towards others. He, like everyone else, is able to rise to the highest sublimity in being moral. So, he can measure himself on a footing of equality with everyone else.

The very last paragraph in Section 11 on servility further supports my claim that Kant indeed had this morally perfectionist view in mind in writing the preceding passages. This is at the same time the second passage in the *Tugendlehre* that relates dignity to worth:

⁷¹ I have argued that this is not Kant's view in my “Dignity and the Formula of Humanity”. It seems that this cannot be Kant's view in light of the ‘Paralogisms’ in the first *Kritik* that would deny any such knowledge.

⁷² Again, see Schönecker/Wood: *Immanuel Kant*, 145.

Aus unserer aufrichtigen und genauen Vergleichung mit dem moralischen Gesetz (dessen Heiligkeit und Strenge) muß unvermeidlich wahre Demuth folgen: aber daraus, daß wir einer solchen inneren Gesetzgebung fähig sind, daß der (physische) Mensch den (moralischen) Menschen in seiner eigenen Person zu verehren sich gedungen fühlt, zugleich *Erhebung* und die höchste Selbstschätzung, als Gefühl seines inneren Werths (*valor*), nach welchem er für keinen Preis (*pretium*) feil ist und eine unverlierbare Würde (*dignitas interna*) besitzt, die ihm Achtung (*reverentia*) gegen sich selbst einflößt. (MS, AA 06: 436.5–13)

Rather than supporting the *contemporary* paradigm of dignity, the section on servility in the *Tugendlehre* – like the *Grundlegung* – talks about the absolute worth of morality and about the elevation of a morally good being. This passage further supports the interpretation of ‘worth’ here advanced. Its message is that one can become aware of the elevation and sublimity of one’s own morally good will, and that one has the duty to oneself not to fall into servility towards others. The relationship of one’s dignity to others is the topic of the third passage that related dignity to worth in the *Tugendlehre*.

The clearest passage that could be read as supporting the *contemporary* paradigm of dignity appears in the *Tugendlehre* in a section on duties towards others. It reads:

Achtung, die ich für andere trage, oder die ein Anderer von mir fordern kann (*observantia aliis praestanda*), ist also die Anerkennung einer *Würde* (*dignitas*) an anderen Menschen, d. i. eines Werths, der keinen Preis hat, kein Äquivalent, wogegen das Object der Werthschätzung (*aestimii*) ausgetauscht werden könnte. (MS, AA 06: 462.10–15)

In this passage Kant seems to say that one can make (moral) claims on others because of an inner worth one possesses, and that this worth is called dignity. This would be an instance of the *contemporary* paradigm of dignity. One should respect others because one recognizes that they have a special kind of worth. On this reading, the good would be prior to the right, and rights prior to duties.

However, if one reads the passage in its context, it becomes clear that here too Kant ties the worth of human beings to morality, and that what one should respect is their striving for dignity. The context of the passage is a consideration of the right attitude towards others. Kant discusses, among others, modesty, self-conceit, arrogance, defamation and contempt (cf. MS, AA 06: 462.01–468.13). The right attitude, Kant affirms, is to respect others without falling into one of these extremes. The reason Kant gives is the following:

Gleichwie er also sich selbst für keinen Preis weggeben kann (welches der Pflicht der Selbstschätzung widerstreiten würde), so kann er auch nicht der eben so nothwendigen Selbstschätzung Anderer als Menschen entgegen handeln, d. i. er ist verbunden, die Würde der Menschheit an jedem anderen Menschen praktisch anzuerkennen. (MS, AA 06: 462.26–30)

This passage is an expression of the *traditional* conception of dignity. Kant says that, just as the agent has a duty towards himself not to lower himself, so everyone else has this duty towards himself. In the language of the *traditional* conception of dignity one can put it in saying: As the agent has a duty to realize his initial dignity, so does everyone else have this duty towards himself. If the agent should respect others, he should respect others in their potential and effort to achieve this dig-

nity.⁷³ Kant's claim here – that one has to acknowledge the dignity of others because everyone has to acknowledge his own dignity – should not be read as an *argument* for the requirement to respect others. It specifies the proper object of respect, i. e. who or what should be respected. That one should respect others striving for morality is a requirement of the Categorical Imperative in the Formula of Humanity:

[D]ie Pflicht der Achtung meines Nächsten ist in der Maxime enthalten, keinen anderen Menschen bloß als Mittel zu meinen Zwecken abzuwürdigen (nicht zu verlangen, der Andere solle sich selbst wegwerfen, um meinem Zwecke zu fröhnen). (MS, AA 06: 450.05–08)⁷⁴

The duty not to degrade others, but to allow (and help) them to strive for dignity, is required by the Formula of Humanity.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Kant adheres to a *traditional* conception of dignity. According to his view, all human beings are elevated over the rest of nature in virtue of freedom. Being free, human beings are subject to the Categorical Imperative that demands that one fulfill one's initial dignity (in making a proper use of one's freedom), and respect others.

While this means that 'dignity' is not itself a concept that carries any justificatory weight, this result should not be surprising. It not only makes sense of Kant's sporadic use of 'dignity' throughout his writings, it also accords with the overall framework of Kant's ethics. He always refers to the Categorical Imperative as the supreme principle of morality; and when he tries to justify the imperative, he does *not* rely on a conception of worth or dignity – as the prevailing reading would have led one to expect. My reading therefore helps to bring out the coherence of Kant's moral writings.

⁷³ Kant can equate 'dignity' and 'worth that has no price' in MS, AA 06: 462.12–13 since the dignity of morality is something that one should value irrespective of whether one has an inclination to do so. This, however, is just another expression for 'worth that has no price' (see above).

⁷⁴ For Kant's conception of respect cf. also MS, AA 06: 449.23–30, where he distinguishes a moral form of respect that is owed to all from a feeling of esteem one might feel for the rank or merit of someone.