

The Concept of Human Dignity

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No one can make you feel inferior without your permission.
- Eleanor Roosevelt -

1. Introduction

Let me begin this chapter by throwing the reader into the midst of controversy: Until 1991, I worked as a clinical psychologist (in the Middle East 1984-1991, among others), and was confronted with many complicated cases, including what is called honour killing. Imagine, a mother approaches you and explains that her daughter was raped and has to be killed to prevent family honour from being humiliated since the rapist will not marry her. As a human rights defender, you stipulate that marrying a raped girl off to her rapist, let alone killing the girl, is equivalent to compounding humiliation, not remedying it. The mother, in turn, regards your attitude as condescending, as humiliating her cultural beliefs. In sum, you face several layers of honour, dignity and humiliation. What position do you take? Whose honour or dignity do you protect? And which arguments do you use?

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Whatever we do in such cases, we always violate somebody's sense of dignity or honour and risk unleashing enraged reactions. This is because we deal with definitions of culture and identity that belong to incompatible normative universes, and this incompatibility triggers processes of humiliation that are hurtful and passions that are hot. The example of honour killings is particularly stark; however, currently the world is riddled with such 'clashes of humiliation,' and the list is long – we find issues of honour killings alongside the topics of female genital cutting or forced marriage, and these are only a few examples.

If you are a human rights defender, how do you defend your beliefs? A friend in the United States told me that she tries to avoid appearing as arrogant Westerner by applying the following strategy: She explains human rights as something she has learned to appreciate through growing up in 'her' American family. Moral values based on human rights therefore, according to her, are neither inferior nor superior to 'other' cultural normative universes, just different.

Try this approach on the Somali woman who declared female genital cutting to be a 'cultural humiliation.' She cried,¹ "My culture humiliates me!" This woman is in the process of defining an alternative culture, namely a Somali culture without female genital mutilation. This woman urges the international community to refrain from 'respecting' Somali culture that allows for female genital mutilation. She wishes the international community to acknowledge her new and different definition of Somali culture instead. This woman does not wish to merely peddle American values. She asks the world to help her explain human rights and female dignity in a more thorough and universal way to her fellow Somali sisters and brothers who accuse her of 'shaming' her own culture.

Jeanne D'Haem² wrote a very sensitive book, *The Last Camel. True Stories of Somalia*, in which she describes what I also found during my fieldwork in Somalia (1998 and 1999). As a Peace Corps volunteer in a small Somali village in 1968, D'Haem had a neighbour who was forced to support herself and her child through prostitution. At the age of 40, she met a man who fell in love with her and was willing to marry her as his second wife. She was very fond of this man and thrilled by the prospect of marriage. To mark this new step toward a better future, she committed a highly symbolic act. She had herself 'closed up' (the vagina sewed up so only urine could pass through) as if she was a virgin. Her husband had to open her up in the wedding night with the force of his member. The pain of all the

¹ Interview conducted in August 1998; she does not want to be named.

² J. D'Haem, *The Last Camel. True Stories of Somalia*, Lawrenceville, The Red Sea Press, 1997.

procedures and the agonising reopening did not deter her since she was convinced that short-term pain would safeguard a happy future. And since she sincerely believed in the worldview of her social environment, namely that female genital mutilation is not a mutilation but a noble symbol of honour, the procedure did, indeed, make her proud and confident.

How do you explain to this woman that female genital cutting and ‘closing up’ is something you think ought to be discontinued? You claim it is painful? Yes, but we all accept pain if we believe that something can be gained through it. Surgery as a field would not exist otherwise. And scores of people undergo cosmetic surgery, accepting pain for beauty; why not accept it for a culture that defines female nobility in a way that requires pain? You claim that the operation is carried out with unclean instruments? Let us get clean instruments then. Why discontinue the practice altogether?

So far, we discussed opposing normative universes of honour and dignity, honour as collective shield for families, clans, or nations, as opposed to dignity that gives priority to the individual. However, the definition of dignity itself is not unequivocal either. Why end poverty? “Is it not the natural order of things that some have more and some have less? Are not some more diligent and others less, all deserving of whatever they get?” says the person who believes in a *just world*, asking you contemptuously, “Shall we distribute Ferraris to everybody?” Here we meet different delineations of the concept of dignity. Is political freedom sufficient to safeguard dignified lives for citizens, or must economic conditions be attended to as well?

In other words, we live in times of transitions. The normative universe of human rights, defined by equal dignity for all, is currently seeping into the universe of honour, putting practices of honour into question; however, the notion of dignity is not stable either but in flux. Not long ago honour killings were ‘respected’ as cultural idiosyncrasy rather than pinpointed as human rights violations. The Indian caste system has been taken up and publicly branded as ‘Indian Apartheid’ as freshly as 2001.³ And economic rights are recent ‘newcomers’ to the field of human rights. To begin with, human rights used to be defined as political rights only. The downtrodden around the world were expected to be industrious and create wealth as soon as they enjoyed political freedom. Poverty as violation of human rights has entered mainstream attention much later making the point that more is at stake than political freedom when we talk about human rights and dignity, that there are also

³ See for example the ‘World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance’ in Durban (South Africa), 31 August - 7 September 2001.

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cultural, social and economic human rights. The term *enabling environment*, for example, entails more than freedom from political oppression. The fact is that we live in times of transition and this is palpable everywhere. Even animals are currently in the process of being included – whales and dolphins, laboratory animals, only to name a few, are increasingly regarded as deserving of dignity. The Earth with its biosphere is ‘dignified’ as well, being named as a living being, ‘Gaia.’

I hope I have wetted the reader’s appetite sufficiently at this point and provoked enough questions for having your attention also for the rest of this text! This paper conveys reflections derived from more than twenty years of international therapeutic experience coupled with social psychological research on dignity and humiliation that I began in 1996. Since 2001, I have been developing a *theory of humiliation* and promoting *humiliation studies* as a new global and transdisciplinary field.⁴

My personal stance in relation to human rights is that I indeed strongly associate myself with the idea of equal worthiness and dignity for every human being (and extensions beyond the human world). However, Westerner arrogance is not my game. To my opinion, people who endorse honour codes, wherever in the world, may not be looked down upon. My conceptualisation is that honour codes had their place in a world that did not yet experience the coming-together of humankind into *one single* unit. The point is that we live in a new reality today and I believe that human rights represent a normative framework that is better adapted to an emerging *global knowledge society*. It is therefore that I wish to encourage every inhabitant of the globe to abandon ‘we/them’ differentiations and define themselves as ‘we,’ as ‘we humanity,’ who, instead of pointing fingers at each other, *together* searches for the best ways to provide our children with a liveable world.

This paper will first attend to the transition from honour codes to dignity norms. Then it will discuss the pain of this transition. In the concluding remarks a vision for a *decent* global village will be presented.

2. Two Moral Universes

Two transitions characterise current historic times. Firstly, there is rising awareness that there is *one* humankind inhabiting our tiny planet. Humankind is coming

⁴ Please see Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS, <http://www.humiliationstudies.org>), and E.G. Lindner, *Making Enemies Unwittingly: Humiliation and International Conflict*, Westport, Praeger, 2006.

together into *one single in-group*. Anthropologists – read for example William Ury⁵ – call this the *ingathering* of the tribes of the earth. Various aspects of this trend have been described and analysed by many, among them by Manuel Castells,⁶ and more recently, Thomas L. Friedman.⁷ Secondly, there is an increasing awareness of human rights ideals. Millions hope that human rights calls will soon represent more than empty rhetoric and will render equal dignity to all citizens in this *one tiny interdependent global village* of ours.

Both transitions are related, however, one precedes the other and the time-lag of the second as compared to the first causes great pain. *Globalisation* (understood here as the coming-together of humankind) has not yet merged with *egalisation*. I coined the term *egalisation* to match the term *globalisation* and at the same time differentiate from words such as equality, equity, or egalitarianism because the main point is equal dignity. The term *egalisation* is meant to avoid claiming that everybody should become equal and that there should be no differences between people. *Egality* can coexist with functional hierarchy that regards all participants as possessing equal dignity; *equality* cannot coexist, though, with hierarchy that defines some people as *lesser* and others as *higher* beings.

Globalisation is driven by technology, while *egalisation* is driven by ethical decisions. If we imagine the world as a ‘container’ with a height and a width, *globalisation* addresses the horizontal dimension, the shrinking width. *Egalisation*, on the other side, concerns the vertical dimension; human rights call for a flat ‘container,’ for all of us to dismantle the high ‘container’ of masters at the top and underlings at the bottom. As of yet, we still live in a ‘high container,’ or in an *undignified* and *ramshackle global village* where millions suffer. Human rights defenders work for *globalisation* to ‘marry’ *egalisation*, in other words, for a *dignified* and *decent global village* for all.

It all started some 30,000 years ago, with anatomically modern humans beginning to colonise Africa and ultimately the rest of the world. Population geneticists believe that the ancestral human population was very small – a mere 2,000 breeding individuals. Until about 10,000 years ago, humans peopled the planet as hunter-gatherers. They did this in small bands of something like two hundred

⁵ W. Ury, *Getting to Peace. Transforming Conflict at Home, at Work, and in the World*, New York, Viking, 1999.

⁶ M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. 1: The Rise of the Network Society, Vol. 2: The Power of Identity, Vol. 3: End of Millennium*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

⁷ T.L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

people, with rather egalitarian societal institutions and with a considerable amount of good quality of life. There is no proof of organised fighting among hunters and gatherers. Jonathan Haas writes, “The Hobbesian view of humans in a constant state of ‘Warre’ is simply not supported by the archaeological record”.⁸ These are good news. ‘Man’ is perhaps not aggressive by nature, but by circumstances. As long as a win-win framing (abundant wild food representing an expandable pie of resources) shapes conditions, human ‘nature’ expresses itself as rather benign.

All this changed around 10,000 years ago, in historic terms quite rapidly, when, in the language of anthropologists, a set of circumstances kicked in which is labelled *circumscription*. *Circumscription* meant that there was simply not enough for everybody anymore, not enough space that could easily be populated and not enough resources that could easily be consumed. Simply, our planet is small, and it gives the illusion of being unlimited only as long as one has not yet reached its limits. Complex agriculture was Homo sapiens’ answer. A new era was rung in, of hierarchically structured groups pitted against each other in fear of being attacked by their neighbours and robbed of their land. As a result, from the time of the introduction of complex agriculture onwards until recently, human history was characterised by rather malign systematic war between hierarchically organised societal units, embedded in a win-lose frame of land as finite resource.

⁸ J. Haas, *Warfare and the Evolution of Culture*, Working Papers 98-11-088, Santa Fe, Santa Fe Institute, 1998, available at <http://www.santafe.edu/sfi/publications/Working-Papers/98-10-088.pdf>, 15 November 2002, p. 8.

2.1. Honour: Human Worthiness is Ranked

The accepted social order in most societies for the past 10,000 years, until recently (and in many societies until today), is that people are embedded into hierarchically organised collectives. Human worth is ranked and not equal and the essence of a person is to be part of a collective and not to have freedom as an individual. To put one's inferiors 'down,' or to be put 'down' by one's superiors, is in many instances a matter of honour and duty. William Ian Miller⁹ explains that up to 1757, in the English language, the verb *to humiliate* meant nothing worse than *to lower* or *to humble*, or to *show underlings their legitimate lowly place*, without any connotation that this may also signify a violation.¹⁰

Humiliation in honour societies (both historic and present) is expressed in a wide variety of ways, ranging from comparably harmless seating orders according to honour and rank, to bowing and kowtowing rules for inferiors in front of their superiors, to brutal measures such as customary beatings or even killings to 'remind' underlings of their place.

Honour is not only a collective concept, but also heavily gendered. Joshua Goldstein¹¹ makes the point that war shapes gender roles and vice versa. The past 10,000 years were years of war, and indeed they were also years of heavy gender division and ranking. Men were sent out to put themselves in harms way in war, and in a number of societies, their women's intact hymen was to 'prove' whether their men succeeded in 'protecting' them or not. Some honour cultures in the Arab world and in Africa, until today, regard the woman's intact hymen as a symbol of the family's honour. Practices of honour killings and female genital mutilation are embedded into this particular cultural web of meanings. In many traditional honour societies, a female is a token, or representative, of the family or group to which she belongs; daughters are needed for marriage into those other families 'her' males want as allies. Only 'undamaged,' 'honourable' girls make honourable gifts. During my field work in Somalia in 1998 and 1999, the 'exchange of women' was a solution mentioned to me by many elders as a way to heal the rifts caused by past inter-clan abuse.

⁹ W.I. Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹¹ J.S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War Systems and Vice Versa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

To conclude – as William Ury¹² so eloquently explains – for many millennia, humankind was caught in the rather malign win-lose framing that is brought about when land is the resource that people depend on. Practices such as honour killings and female genital cutting are part and parcel of an adaptation to such conditions; however, these very conditions are now in the process of changing and we need new adaptations. Some of the old adaptations appear to be extremely cruel from the perspective of the global knowledge society that today promises to bring back the more benign win-win framing that hunter-gatherers enjoyed, this time not wild food but knowledge as expandable resource. All this is not a question of arrogance on the part of some, but a challenge for us all to build a better future for everybody.

2.2. The Transition from Honour to Dignity

Medieval Christianity stressed the misery and worthlessness of *homo viator*, earthly man. Life on earth meant suffering and this had to be accepted with dutiful and obedient humility and meekness – this was a worldview not only in Christianity. Perhaps, ruling elites found it convenient to have their underlings believe in such a world order so as to make it palatable to them to be bonded into ranked collectives. At best, rewards could be expected in an afterlife.

The concept of dignity, as it emerged in European history, opposes precisely those two discourses of collectivism and this-worldly suffering. The concept of dignity embraces life on earth as something positive and rejects collectivist hierarchy, instead emphasising individual rights. In a way, dignity links up to former more benign hunting-gathering times of human history.

The term dignity has its root in the Latin words *decus* and *decorum* (Sanskrit *dac-as*, ‘fame’). For Cicero, dignity was a quality of masculine beauty. Even though it was discussed, the concept of dignity was not forged into an internally consistent set of ideas in classical and Christian antiquity and in the Latin Middle Ages in Europe. This changed with the advent of what we label Renaissance. The Renaissance began in Florence in Italy in the wake of its liberating and energising experience of being a republic (by 1415). In tact with the increasing secularism manifested in the expanding economic, political, and social activities of late medieval Europe, human beings’ this-worldly dignity and achievements were highlighted. Giannozzo Manetti (1396-1459), born in Florence as son of a rich merchant, and later Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), another Florentine humanist, as

¹² W. Ury, *supra* note 5.

well as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), gave philosophical and theological form to the importance of this-worldly dignity.

Later, the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and Catholic Reform in combination with the emergence of the new science drastically impacted on the conception of dignity because the place of the human being in the universe was deeply affected. 'Rationality' was applied to every problem and thinkers and writers doing so were no longer punished for violating established ideas. The Age of Enlightenment in Europe's eighteenth century is often thought of as part of a larger period which includes the Age of Reason. Peter Gay,¹³ explains that the Enlightenment provided ideas such as freedom, democracy and reason and the establishment of a contractual basis of rights and that this would ultimately lead to the market mechanism and capitalism, to the scientific method, to religious and racial tolerance, and the organisation of States into self-governing republics through democratic means.

While the Enlightenment stands for the contractual basis of rights, Romanticism (artistic, political, philosophical and social trend arising out of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe) is noted for its celebration of what it perceived as heroic individuals. Even though Romanticism is often seen as antithesis to the Enlightenment, in concert both have strengthened the role of the individual, protected by contract and imbued with free choice.

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), a Prussian philosopher, regarded as one of history's most influential thinkers and one of the last major philosophers of the Enlightenment, had a major impact on the Romantic and Idealist philosophies of the nineteenth century. *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*, an anthology edited by Robin Sleigh Dillon,¹⁴ gathers philosophical essays on self-respect and draws on Kant. It addresses the complexity of self-respect, and its embeddedness in concepts such as personhood, dignity, rights, character, autonomy, integrity, shame, oppression and empowerment and humility (with humility no longer meaning meek acceptance of lowliness).

Robin draws our attention to our *duty for self-respect*: We cannot be moral citizens, if we violate our own dignity. Kant¹⁵ defines three forms of self-respect. The third form has two components: "Humility, on the one hand, and true, noble

¹³ P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

¹⁴ R.S. Dillon (ed.), *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect*, New York, Routledge, 1995.

¹⁵ I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics [1775-1780]*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co, 1963.

pride (Stolz) on the other are elements of proper self-respect”.¹⁶ Kant¹⁷ explains that humility is when we recognise that we always fall short in our moral behaviour and have to limit our opinion of our moral worth, while positive self-assessment and noble pride flow from a consciousness of having “honored and preserved humanity in one’s own person and in its dignity”.¹⁸

Dillon concludes her book with recommendations to underlings (in her case to women), saying that self-understanding lies at the heart of self-respect. She writes, “[...] self-understanding can be self-respecting rebellion against subordination. For as Jean Baker Miller explains, there is a relationship between self-ignorance and domination [...] striving to understand oneself is reclaiming oneself from oppression through one’s insistence that one is worthy of being known, that self-understanding is appropriate, warranted, indeed called for what any self-respecting person must do”.¹⁹

2.3. Human Rights: Human Worthiness Is no Longer Ranked

The first paragraph of article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948, reads: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” In this context, ‘humiliation’ is to transgress the rightful expectations of every human being and of all humanity that basic human rights will be respected.

As old ideas of natural order were overtaken by new ideas of natural rights, humiliation was transformed from an ‘honourable social medicine’ into a ‘dishonourable social disease.’ Stripping away one’s dignity became as profound a violation as stripping away one’s flesh, and humiliation was redefined as a mortal wounding of one’s very being. Around the year 1757, together with a new vision of a *social contract* based on human rights and the idea of equal dignity, a new meaning of the word *humiliation* emerged. William Ian Miller informs us that “the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁷ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrily, 1956.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁹ R.S. Dillon (ed.), *supra* note 14, at 303.

earliest recorded use of *to humiliate* meaning to mortify or to lower or to depress the dignity or self-respect of someone does not occur until 1757".²⁰

The human rights call for equal dignity for all represents a transition from one normative universe to another, from the legitimate ranking of human worth and value, to de-legitimising this very practice and labelling it a violation. It is like switching from right-hand to left-hand driving, or vice versa. There is no way a world can work in which some people drive in the left lane and others in the right lane and some in the middle. The problem is that ranking and not-ranking cannot be combined, one excludes the other. Currently, we are in the midst of this historic transition, with many communities and societies still applying the honour code, while others, more or less whole-heartedly, attempt to enshrine human rights in their rules and institutions. It is not surprising that numerous 'accidents' occur in the course of these transformations and that painful feelings of humiliation abound on all sides.

However, apart from the qualitative conversion from ranking to not-ranking, another gradual transition takes place within the 'dignity camp.' The scope of the concept of dignity itself is not fixed either, but in flux.

2.4. The Transition from a Narrow to a Broad Definition of Dignity: Kantian or Lévinasian?

Human rights stipulate that each human being possesses an inner core of dignity that ought not be humiliated. Or, to be more precise, there is a Lévinasian connection to equality hidden in the notion of equal dignity. Emmanuel Lévinas (1906 - 1995) was a Jewish philosopher from Lithuania, who moved to France and wrote most of his works in French. His work focuses on the ethics of the *Other*. According to Lévinas, the *Other* is not knowable and cannot be made into an object, as is posited by traditional metaphysics.

The 'Trojan' connection is implicated in the human rights stipulation that equal chances and enabling environments for all are necessary to protect human dignity. As soon as human rights are defined in this way, when 'equal chances and enabling environments for all' are on the table, Lévinasian 'caring for the other' is also on the table. The Kantian version could be simplified as follows. 'Equal dignity means that, although you are poor, you can have full dignity. What is necessary for you in order to have dignity is a societal framework that gives you political rights, such as the right of free speech. In other words, you can be poor and at the same time dignified

²⁰ W.I. Miller, *supra* note 9, at 175.

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and happy.’ The Lévinasian version would go as follows, again, simplified. ‘You are poor and live under circumstances that violate human dignity. However, dignity can enter your life by embedding you within an enabling environment that gives you the chance to work yourself out of debilitating poverty into more dignified quality of life.’

What is relevant here is the discussion of so-called *negative* and *positive* (‘welfare’) *rights*. *Negative rights* have at their core the right to be free of violence. Negative rights constitute a nonaggression axiom. *Positive rights*, on the other side, are rights to food, clothing, shelter, and meaningful experiences. They entail the Lévinasian caring aspect.

There is a problem with positive rights, however, at least when they are framed as forced egalitarianism. Who shall give all the food, clothing, shelter, and meaningful experiences and how should this be given? Is not a coercive socialist State needed to do that? What about cars, and villas and luxury items that people may wish to own so as to have meaningful experiences? Who is to distribute such luxury and from where should it be taken? And what happens when one person buys a Ferrari? Does not this mean, in a positive rights framework where everybody is entitled to equal conditions, that everybody has a right to own a Ferrari? Would it not be crazy, if one person’s luxury would automatically bring about the right of the rest to own the same? And what about charity? Is not the notion of charity destroyed when the poor claim a right to equal conditions? And, let alone poverty, what about inequalities in beauty and intelligence? Should not the beautiful and smart construct a machine that would transfer some of their beauty and intelligence to the less fortunate so as to attain levelled conditions? In other words, positive rights, if framed as forced egalitarianism, are merely unrealistic and unrealisable. They portray a nightmare of indistinguishable, interchangeable human beings. Therefore the argument is often made that only negative rights are legitimate.

Yet, positive rights may be framed differently, not as everybody having the right to own a Ferrari, but as a right to enjoy *enabling circumstances*. Positive rights could be defined not as rights to be overindulged, but as rights to be nurtured to the point that self-help has a chance. We do not usually withhold care from our children out of fear that they will expect being nurtured lifelong. Parents frame their input as enabling their children to stand on their own feet at some point later in their lives. A certain amount of nurturing is necessary so as to give children a chance to protect their dignity. In the same spirit, a certain amount of facilitating seems desirable society-wide. This is because parents wish to release their children into a world that actually gives them a chance to build dignified lives for themselves. Even the best child nurture is useless if adult life only meets closed doors. Mapped onto the international system this means that aid is useful, and must be combined with fair

global trade rules and embedded in good local and global governance, all this enabling people to step out of poverty.

2.5. Globalisation as Lévinasian Push

“Individuals or groups within our moral boundaries are seen as deserving of the same fair, moral treatment as we deserve. Individuals or groups outside these boundaries are seen as undeserving of this same treatment.”²¹ In other words, we feel *we* deserve more than *they*. The process of *globalisation*, in moving towards one single in-group, currently slowly expands the circle of what we feel in our gut is *us* to include all humankind, and even animals and abiotic nature. *Changing gut feelings* indicate that we all are participants in a historic development from several separate *ingroup ethics* that excluded *outgroups*, towards ethical gut feelings that embrace *one single ingroup*. The Lévinasian version of human rights is gaining ground in the hearts and minds of an increasing number of people via the notion of dignity and its embeddedness into *globalisation*. Lévinasian *global village ingroup ethics* force themselves upon everybody. As mentioned earlier, even animals are increasingly being embraced by our empathy. Organisations such as *Animals Angels*, just to give one of countless examples, protect and help stranded animals or supervise animal transports to ensure a dignified treatment. The habit of eating animals, as well, is increasingly eschewed; vegetarianism is on the rise. (Spaceship Enterprise and other media products have managed to introduce even extraterrestrials into human hearts, thus showing that we are willing to go as far as welcoming the entire universe.)

If we think of African concepts of dignity that could be drawn upon by the rest of the world in these times of transition, Ubuntu comes to mind. Ubuntu is a traditional humanist African ideology meaning ‘I exist as human being because you exist as human being,’ in other words, ‘if I don’t recognise you, I don’t exist.’ Another translation could be: ‘The belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.’ The word *Ubuntu* has its roots in the Zulu and Xhosa languages, the Zulu maxim being *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* or ‘a person is a person through other persons.’ Ubuntu is seen as one of the founding principles of the new South Africa, and is relevant for the idea of the so-called African Renaissance. In the political

²¹ P.T. Coleman, “Power and conflict”, in M. Deutsch, P.T. Coleman (eds.), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, pp. 108-130, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2000, p. 118.

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sphere, the concept of Ubuntu emphasises the need for a humanitarian ethic as basis for a consensual approach to decision-making.

3. Unwise Transition Management Is What Hurts Most

As long as people lived for themselves, and the next valley was several days on foot or horse-back away, warm inclusive feelings for all inhabitants of the Earth had little chance to develop. The situation changes, however, when people get closer. Then even love stories may emerge. Although we do not literally enter into a love relationship with the rest of the *global village*'s inhabitants (or extraterrestrials for that matter), their coming closer makes them relevant to us as people who we compare us with, as people we would like to get recognition from, and as people who humiliate us when they do not respect us. *Globalisation* (the coming-together of humankind) turns *absolute* deprivation into *relative* deprivation and Lévinasian human rights turn *debilitating relative deprivation* into a *violation of human dignity*. Let me share with you the reflections a friend from the so-called 'undeveloped' world sent to me: "We, the poor of the world hear that poverty is a humiliating violation of our human rights and dignity. We learn that we deserve enabling environments that empower us as human beings. We know how these enabling circumstances should look – access to clean water, health care, a flat, work, a refrigerator, a television set, and, one day, a car, vacation, and university studies for our children. All this is what our local elites and the people of the rich West have. Western tourists and soap operas are an ample source of information for us.

However, our reality, our poverty, gets worse. We are told that our humanity is debased, and then it is debased even more. This is perpetrated by the same people, those from the rich West, who say that they stand for human rights. In our eyes the West is worse than the worst hypocrite. This is the ultimate betrayal."

Stephan Feuchtwang, who studies how people grieve, wrote me on 13 November 2002, in a personal note, "I am intrigued by two of your contentions. One is that breaches of the promise of human rights create severe humiliation. Why not a sense of betrayal and hypocrisy, which is not the same as humiliation?" I replied: "Absolutely, as far as I can judge, there is a deep sense of betrayal and hypocrisy. But then emerges the next question that those who feel thus ask: 'Why do these people preach empty human rights rhetoric to us? Is it in order to fool us about their wishes to stay at the top and continue exploiting us? The motive sensed behind the

betrayal is arrogance and the wish to stay at the top. This then is felt to be humiliating.”

Feuchtwang responded with an observation that impacted me: “to recognise humanity hypocritically and betray the promise humiliates in the most devastating way by denying the humanity professed.”²²

In other words, humankind manages the transition from ranked worthiness to equal dignity for all unprofessionally, inefficiently, and unwisely. It is unwise to preach ideals and not let reality follow. It is hurtfully inconsistent to invite the downtrodden of the world as equals into the family of humankind and then, when they knock at the gates of the rich, full of hope, shut the door in their face. And it is unrealistic for human rights advocates to believe that the top dogs of the world will abandon their privileges easily; it is counterproductive to give aid to tyrants, for example. And it is naïve to let aid be steered by other interests than the common good as defined by human rights. Corruption, for example, is a problem not only of certain ‘recipient countries,’ but of all those – and they are to be found among the recipients as well as in the donor community – who do not have this common good at their heart.

After many years of failed aid programmes, many observers agree that more attention has to be paid to ensuring that their help meets the needs of the recipients. The recipients are judged ‘right’ in feeling humiliated by ill-considered help. In Africa, I continuously met descriptions of UN or NGO activities that came close to parody (but containing elements of truth): “You helpers come along, build wells (or some other installations or services liable to be ecologically unsound or unmanageable in the longer run), create a few short-term jobs for chauffeurs, secretaries and security personnel, and then you disappear again!”

When I came back to Africa in 1998, my motivation to do research was suspect to many. I encountered the following complaints: “First you colonise us. Then you leave us with a so-called democratic state that is alien to us. After that you watch us getting dictatorial leaders. Then you give them weapons to kill half of us. Finally you come along to ‘measure’ our suffering and claim that this will help us!? Are you crazy?”

How was I to react? Was I to feel humiliated by such aggressive insults hurled at my perfectly benevolent intentions? Should I merely shrug my shoulders and label these critics as oversensitive people, clinging to old injuries instead of getting their act together and rising from their lamentable condition? Who was to blame? What is helpful research? How should it be designed to be of benefit and contribute to more dignity for all rather than to humiliation? I tried to listen more. “You Westerners get

²² S. Feuchtwang, 14 November 2002, in a personal note.

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a kick out of our problems. You have everything back home, you live in luxury, and you are blind to that. You think you're suffering when you can't take a shower or have to wait for the bus for more than two hours! Your four-wheel drive cars cover our people with dust! You enjoy being a king in our country, but you're just average at home! All you want is to have fun, get a good salary, write empty reports to your organisation back home or publish some articles, so you can continue this fraud. You are a hypocrite! You know that we need help – how glad we'd be not to need it! It would be great if you'd really listen to us, not just to the greedy ones among us who exploit your arrogant stupidity for their own good! We feel deeply humiliated by your arrogant and self-congratulating help!"²³

What is the solution? A senior adviser in the European Union Delegation of the European Commission in Kenya explained to me how humiliation is institutionalised in the relations between the international organisations and the recipient countries.²⁴ He explained that though the principles of empowerment are widely known and accepted, they are not followed. What is needed today is the exercise of empowerment: "We need cooperation, not assistance!" he said. "We need joint management of projects, together with local partners, with international organisation slowly phasing out. [...] Of course humiliation should not now be moved from the recipient to the donor, there must be a balance. The bottom line is always: avoidance of corruption, where does the money go to, transparency, good governance, and accountability. Humiliation is now institutionalised in the way international organisations approach the recipients and what is needed is the operationalisation of ways how to change that."

²³ This is taken from an interview with an African intellectual on 2 January 1999 in Kenya; however this view was typical of African intellectuals.

²⁴ This discussion took place on 2 December 1998 in Somaliland.

4. Concluding Remarks

Two trends drive current historic times, *globalisation* and *egalisation*. At the present point in time we face a lack of *egalisation*. In this paper, *globalisation* is defined as the coming-together of humankind, or what anthropologists call the *ingathering* of the tribes of the earth. *Egalisation* is defined as the realisation of equal dignity for all. Both trends are related: The process of *globalisation* represents a push toward *egalisation*, albeit with a hurtful time-lag. *Globalisation*, among others, raises our awareness that there is but *one* humankind inhabiting a tiny interdependent planet that can only survive if all cooperate (and *cooperation* cannot be ordered, cooperation is difficult to achieve by force), and that furthermore, in an upcoming global knowledge society, creativity is needed (and *creativity* cannot be ordered either but thrives when conditions are enabling).

At the current point in history, there is great disappointment that the human rights call for equal dignity for all still entails too much empty rhetoric. We live in an *undignified* and *ramshackle global village* where millions live in abject poverty. However, there is also great hope. Many work for *globalisation* to ‘marry’ *egalisation* – for dignified living conditions for all citizens in this one *global village* of ours. Experts such as Philippe Legrain²⁵ delineate the responsibility that has to be shouldered by global institutions, and Jeffrey Sachs²⁶ lays out how the Millennium Development Goals²⁷ may be implemented.

Michio Kaku, renowned physicist, concludes his book on *Parallel Worlds* with the following paragraph: “The generation now alive is perhaps the most important generation of humans ever to walk the Earth. Unlike previous generations, we hold in our hands the future destiny of our species, whether we soar into fulfilling our promise as a type I civilization or fall into the abyss of chaos, pollution, and war. Decisions made by us will reverberate throughout this century. How we resolve global wars, proliferating nuclear weapons, and sectarian and ethnic strife will either lay or destroy the foundations of a type I civilization. Perhaps the purpose and meaning of the current generation are to make sure that the transition to a type I

²⁵ P. Legrain, *Open World: The Truth About Globalisation*, London, Abacus, 2002.

²⁶ J. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*, New York, Penguin Group, 2005.

²⁷ For more details, please see <<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>>.

civilization is a smooth one. The choice is ours. This is the legacy of the generation now alive. This is our destiny”.²⁸

Kaku explains that our civilization today is still quite primitive and may be classified as a type 0 civilization. However, he posits, we already see signs of a transition taking place: the Internet; the forming of large trading blocs resembling the European Union; nations becoming less important as trade barriers fall; pollution increasingly being tackled on a planetary scale; increased pressure to manage our resources on a global scale or else face famine and collapse; wars being in the process of changing; information being almost free; societies becoming much more democratic allowing the disenfranchised to gain a new voice, and putting pressure on dictatorships (Kaku, 2005, pp. 309-310).

The human-rights movement is still young, old honour scripts of submission/domination continue to be strong, and new scripts are either lacking or weak. However, this can be changed, and it must be changed, if we are to save our world and reach Kaku's type I civilization. We have to make new insights part of our cultures, locally and globally.²⁹ Ubuntu is Africa's important contribution. Redefining our scripts for the cluster of positive relational feelings – loyalty, devotion, caring warmth, and so forth – might hold an important key to a sustainable, just and peaceful world that makes dignified lives possible to all. In the spirit of *The Decent Society* by Avishai Margalit³⁰ we need to build a *decent global village* – a world based on human rights, extending the opportunity for dignified lives to all.

²⁸ M. Kaku, *Parallel Worlds: A Journey Through Creation, Higher Dimensions, and the Future of the Cosmos*, New York, Doubleday, 2005, p. 361.

²⁹ See, for examples, E.G. Lindner, “Emotion and Conflict”, in M. Deutsch, P.T. Coleman & E.C. Marcus (eds), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed., San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2006, and E.G. Lindner, “Healing the Cycles of Humiliation: How to Attend to the Emotional Aspects of ‘Unsolvable’ Conflicts and the Use of ‘Humiliation Entrepreneurship’”, (2002) 8.2. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 125-138.

³⁰ A. Margalit, *The Decent Society*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996.