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Introduction

Have You Seen Dignity?

One of Bob Dylan's songs from the 1980s is entitled 'Dignity'.[1] 'Have you seen dignity?', goes the refrain. 'Searchin' high, searchin' low / Searchin' everywhere I know / Askin' the cops wherever I go / Have you seen dignity?' I thought of that song when, one day, I was in a car on a motorway near Canberra in Australia, and indeed dignity hove into my line of sight (Figure 1.1).

Of course, Dylan's seeker is not looking for, and failing to find, a *word*. But if his song carries a message about the elusiveness of dignity (or perhaps about its obscurity or mystery), I take that Ford Territory as a vivid reminder that, from another perspective, dignity is all around us – a highly conspicuous word which is not just a word, but also a perceptible occurrence in the world.

The subject of this book is dignity and its worldliness. A few observations will provide an initial sense of the general direction in which my enquiry will go. To focus on dignity is to pick out a term from a conceptual cluster that includes respect, esteem, honour, decorum, propriety, decency, respectability, reputation, regard, pride, prestige, confidence, consideration, worthiness and civility. Dignity is held to be special on diverse grounds, but one feature about which there is widespread consensus is that dignity belongs innately to all human beings. Whether we consult constitutions and human rights instruments or philosophical writings and school

[1] 'Dignity' was originally recorded in 1989, though only released as part of Dylan's *Greatest Hits Volume 3* in 1994.

Figure 1.1 'Dignity'. Ford Territory, seen from behind on a motorway near Canberra.

teaching materials, we will be informed that dignity is inherent. It is something that everyone just has.

Yet if dignity is inherent, we know that, in actuality, the experience of it is far from universal. However solemn, firm and loud our proclamations that dignity belongs to everyone, there can be no mistaking that it is very unevenly distributed. Part of life's comfortable furniture for some, it arrives only hard-won for others – those latter all too aware of the systems of privilege and power that structure access also to this. At the same time, what is striking is how little of that unevenness registers in our most celebrated and influential writing about dignity. In these predominantly abstract studies, the concept is lifted out of history and shaken free of circumstance. It is unfastened from frameworks of privilege and power, so that deficits of dignity come to appear discrete discrepancies between rhetoric and reality, as opposed to signs of a wider and deeper problem to do with the reality itself.

Abstraction, of course, has its place, but I seek, rather, to capture the embeddedness of dignity in historically specific conditions of existence. The present investigation proceeds from the premise that dignity both has social effects and is itself an effect of social processes. The idea that it has social effects raises the question not only of what dignity is, what it means, but also of what it does – how it works as part of the phenomena that configure the world and our relationships within it. The idea that it is an effect of social processes raises the question of how, in turn, the world configures dignity. Studies of dignity in the abstract mode make it seem as though we confront an object that has reached society and the mind fully formed. I am interested in the ways in which dignity is instead produced, defined, shaped and contested in and through collective human activity.

The concept of dignity has had a high-profile, if controversial, role in approaches to bioethical policy and evaluation. In a widely cited editorial contribution to the *British Medical Journal*, Ruth Macklin argued in 2003 that dignity was, in fact, 'useless' in this context because it was 'hopelessly vague', and added nothing to more precise bioethical concepts with well-established implications, such as respect for persons. By her account, dignity was a 'mere slogan' that could 'be eliminated without any loss of content'.[2] Steven Pinker later renewed the charge, characterising dignity as 'a squishy, subjective notion hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands' which bioethicists were assigning it. And that was not yet to broach the ignoble history of 'repressions … rationalized as a defense of the dignity of a state, leader, or creed' which came with it.[3]

My own wish better to understand the concept of dignity arises from its prominence in the sphere of human rights, where I mostly

[2] Ruth Macklin, 'Dignity is a Useless Concept', *British Medical Journal* 327 (2003) 1419, 1419–20.

[3] Steven Pinker, 'The Stupidity of Dignity', *New Republic*, 28 May 2008 (expressing concern about religious, and especially Catholic, influence on biomedical science policy). For a related perspective on legislative developments in Switzerland that protect both human and nonhuman dignity, see also, for example, Alison Abbott, 'Swiss "Dignity" Law is Threat to Plant Biology', *Nature* 452 (2008) 919 and James Toomey, 'Constitutionalizing Nature's Law: Dignity and the Regulation of Biotechnology in Switzerland', *Journal of Law and the Biosciences* 7 (1) (2020) 1.

work, and where its utility and role have been questioned in similar terms. In an essay about 'rights talk' published in 2006, Mirko Bagaric and James Allan criticised dignity as a 'vacuous concept' that had 'little function [in relation to human rights] beyond the polemical'.[4] Less damningly, but still on the theme of unhelpfulness, Samuel Moyn wrote some years later of how 'it's not possible to derive from [the] idea of human dignity all that human rights law might protect. For example, the Universal Declaration [of Human Rights] makes room for economic and social protections, but how can the notion of human dignity justify the declaration's more specific protection of unionization rights or paid vacations?'[5]

While the matter of what can and cannot be derived from the idea of human dignity, or justified with reference to it, is perhaps less clearcut than Moyn suggests here, the main thing to be clarified now is that this book too takes up its topic in a critical spirit, but not out of concern with vacuousness or inefficacy.[6] Squishy subjectivity and hollow sloganeering will not be the problems that preoccupy us here. Rather, our focus will be on dignity's (meaningful, observable, consequential) relation with oppression and exploitation, and with the forms of social hierarchy and modes of popular resistance that have respectively supported and challenged them. I do not postulate the concept's essential or necessary usefulness to emancipatory endeavours, but I do note that it is employed in ways that are replete with significance and distinctly concrete in their implications.

How is one to grasp those ways? *The Promise of Happiness* is a study by Sara Ahmed of what she terms 'the happiness turn' in public policy and culture.[7] The book discusses the emergence of 'happiness indices' and the rise of a 'happiness industry', linked to the pursuit of 'wellness', the practice of 'positive' thinking, and the unremitting search for more and better 'feelgood' factors. In introducing her subject, Ahmed writes of how the 'face of

[4] Mirko Bagaric and James Allan, 'The Vacuous Concept of Dignity', *Journal of Human Rights* 5 (2006) 257, 269, 268.

[5] Samuel Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (London: Verso, 2014), 24. (Like Pinker, Moyn highlights the influence of Catholic theologians in promoting dignity as a pivotal or overriding ethical concept.)

[6] See Chapter 6.

[7] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

happiness . . . [often] looks rather like the face of privilege'. 'Rather than assuming that happiness is simply found in "happy persons"', she proposes that we should consider 'how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable'.[8] What is needed – what she will relate – is a history of happiness that challenges the history of which the happiness turn is presented as a culmination by bringing back in 'those who are banished from it, or who enter [it] only as troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy'.[9]

It is my wager that one might study dignity in something like that manner. Just as Ahmed invites us not simply to assume that happiness is to be found in 'happy persons', but rather to consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable, so we might ask how claims to dignity and ideas about what is dignified confirm privileged people as deserving of their status and power. And just as she brings back into the history of happiness those who have been banished from it or who enter it only as troublemakers, dissenters and killers of joy, so we might attend to dignity's outsiders – those who are denied dignity, those who refuse dignity, those of whom intellectual histories of dignity fail to take adequate account – and thereby be led to interrogate that which, ordinarily, we only ever defend. We might learn from the presumptively undignified – not because they can teach us what it is to be undignified, but because they are instructive guides to the dignity we may think we know.[10]

The outsiders of dignity are many, and they are to be found everywhere. The heart of this book comprises a series of chapters which bring back outsiders from parts of the colonised world, itself also mostly absent from the intellectual histories of dignity. To enable close consideration, we zero in on specific people, events and indeed objects. The first of these chapters examines the issue of dignity in relation to some photographs that were taken in mid-nineteenth century Australia of Trucanini, the Indigenous Tasmanian woman of the Nuennone people to whom my title makes reference.[11] The second of the chapters turns to early

[8] Ibid., 11. [9] Ibid., 17.
[10] Ibid.: 'The sorrow of the stranger might give us a different angle on happiness not because it teaches us what it is like or must be like to be a stranger, but because it might estrange us from the very happiness of the familiar.'
[11] See Chapter 3.

twentieth-century India; we look at the discourse of dignity which was an important element in the campaign for homespun cloth, or *khadi,* waged by M. K. Gandhi and his allies.[12] In the third and final of the chapters, we move forward in time again to twenty-first century South Africa, and probe the place of dignity in the so-called 'toilet wars' waged by black South Africans contesting their country's racialised sanitation arrangements.[13]

Of course, outsiders are not necessarily complete outsiders. In particular, Gandhi is often mentioned in the literature on dignity. Highlighting that he carried himself in a manner that was neither 'haughty' nor 'submissive', and was not 'at all disinclined to press [his] rights' or 'dishonoured by the fact' of doing so,[14] many scholars consider him to have exemplified a modern kind of dignity that contrasts with the 'form of dignity . . . built on a practice requiring the belittling of fellow human beings'.[15] On the subject of Gandhi's own discourse of dignity and its background and reception, however, scholarly discussion is much less common. Enquiry into those matters, and into the other matters just adumbrated, bears on the question of whose history is narrated by a history of dignity and how such a history should be narrated – what is significant for it? who belongs in it? where and in which processes might it be seen to unfold? Through our contextualised snapshots, a concept that can sometimes appear insubstantial will be disclosed as instead rich, complex and contentious, with many usages and a great deal put at stake.

I want to flag up something else which will not form part of this study. Is dignity a quality or property possessed only by humans? At a time of ongoing environmental destruction and catastrophic global warming, the argument is widely made that we need to reconsider ideas which predicate the separation of human beings from the rest of planetary life, and which foster ambitions for ever-expanding mastery or dominion over nature. Dignity is sometimes part of that argument. Thus, one reads in a range of literatures – posthuman studies, animal studies, posthumanist ecology, anti-

[12] See Chapter 4. [13] See Chapter 5.

[14] Michael Meyer, 'Dignity as a (Modern) Virtue', in David Kretzmer and Eckart Klein (eds.), *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002), 195, 198.

[15] Ibid., 200.

speciesism, vitalist materialism, post-anthropocentrism, justice for nonhumans, the 'ontological turn' – of the dignity of nonhuman animals and the necessity of respect for it.[16] One also reads of the dignity of, for example, rivers[17] and forests.[18] In the Romantic tradition of European painting, virtues including dignity were conventionally projected onto animals, though that appears to have been less an assertion of nonhuman dignity than a sentimental or parodic artistic genre grounded in anthropomorphism.[19]

Conversely, figurative language involving animality has often been used, at least in English, to denounce, or indeed justify, the ill-treatment of human beings. To be treated 'like an animal' is to be treated in the most undignified possible manner, and it is observed that the force of such figurative language depends on taking for granted the ontological distinction and ethical hierarchy which underpins the violent exploitation of nonhuman animals by humans.[20] To be sure, the force of such figurative language may also depend, as in the case of a pork processing plant in North Carolina on which one study reports, on the actual and even uncannily exact replication of that ethical hierarchy in relations between racialised human groups.[21] Yet, again, it is observed that the worst abuses fall on the nonhuman animals.[22] These seem to me important issues, with which scholars and activists are rightly engaged. However, they are not my issues in this book. My interest here is in the dignity of human beings, and I make no claims either

[16] See, for example, Reed Elizabeth Loder, 'Animal Dignity', *Animal Law* 23(1) (2016) 1.

[17] See, for example, Colin Thorne, 'Restoring the Dignity of Rivers' (7 August 2017), available at: https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/blue-greencities/2017/08/07/dignityofrivers/.

[18] See, for example, Arundhati Roy, *Broken Republic* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), 155 (evoking 'the great dignity of the forest I had so recently walked in').

[19] See, for example, Edwin Henry Landseer, *Dignity and Impudence* (London: Tate, 1839), available at: www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/landseer-dignity-and-impudence-n00604 (depicting two dogs in a parody of the Dutch portrait tradition, one a 'dignified' bloodhound and the other an 'impudent' terrier).

[20] On this point, see, for example, Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 83, and Cary Wolfe, 'Introduction', in Cary Wolfe (ed.), *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), ix, xx.

[21] See Charlie LeDuff, 'At the Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die', in Cary Wolfe (ed.), *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 183.

[22] See Wolfe, 'Introduction', ix, xx–xxi.

for the uniqueness of human dignity or for the critique of a unique human dignity as false dualism.[23] It is time now to begin getting a handle on our subject.

He Just Wanted to Live

Why would someone drive a car with a registration plate bearing the word 'dignity'? This might be strange to hear, but I wondered when I saw it whether perhaps the owner of the car owned a funeral business which he or she was trying to advertise. Clearly, the explanation may have been nothing of the sort, but in the United Kingdom where I live, the market for funerals is, in fact, dominated by a company called Dignity. Dignity is the UK's only publicly listed provider of funeral services, and apparently has 800 funeral locations and operates 46 crematoria. Searching further online, and returning momentarily to the topic of nonhuman dignity, I learned that there is also a pet cremator called Dignity, along with an equine cremator of the same name, which is said to provide a 'dignified send-off for horses, ponies and donkeys of all sizes'.[24]

The Latin root-word of dignity is known to many people as the name of a place in Switzerland where you can go to end your life. The world's first centre for assisted dying, Dignitas, is run as a non-profit members' society, dedicated to 'self-determination, autonomy and dignity'. Its website carries the strapline 'To live with dignity, to die with dignity'.[25] The concept of 'death with dignity' is one that we hear about a lot in debates about euthanasia, assisted suicide, non-resuscitation, and the right to die. A number of states of the United States have Death with Dignity Acts which establish legal frameworks for the voluntary self-administration of lethal doses of drugs prescribed for the purpose by a doctor. Dignity in Dying is a campaigning organisation which advocates for change in the law to allow assisted dying in the United Kingdom.

Apart from that association with death and dying, dignity has a strong association with health care, social care and matters of

[23] On 'the dualistic fantasy of a unique human dignity', see Deborah Anker, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 151 (discussing the concept of dignity and its relation to animal being in J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*).

[24] See www.dignityequinecremations.co.uk/.

[25] See www.dignitas.ch/?lang=en.

personal hygiene. The concept of 'period dignity', implying the right of access to products and information relating to menstruation, has gained currency in recent years. Equally, 'toilet dignity' is an ongoing issue, as our subsequent discussion of the South African toilet wars will illustrate.[26] In 2018, an organisation was set up in Scotland to distribute what it calls 'Dignity Boxes'. The boxes contain basic toiletries, and the system is that people donate toiletry items, which are then put into small boxes that are left openly in places with high levels of deprivation, to be taken and used by people in need. By making available daily necessities of this kind 'without [the recipients'] having to ask or thank anyone', the organisation hopes, in its words, 'to promote in a small way self-worth and dignity'.[27]

The National Dignity Council of the United Kingdom is a network of health and social care professionals and others, dedicated to promoting what it calls 'Dignity in Care'.[28] Dignity in Care is the basis of a '10 Point Dignity Challenge' – the 'Dignity Do's' – which the Council has elaborated, comprising ten values and actions designed to ensure respect for people's dignity in hospitals, community health services, and care facilities. The Council has designated 1 February an annual Dignity Action Day, with themes such as, on one recent occasion, 'Putting Undignified Care to Bed'.[29] To help in carrying forward its work, the Council appoints a high-profile 'Dignity Ambassador', along with on-the-ground 'Dignity Champions', and distributes 'Dignity in Care' badges and wristbands. Posters prepared or inspired by the National Dignity Council can be seen in doctor's surgeries and hospitals throughout the country.

This emphasis on dignity extends to the field of medical and disability technologies. Dignity Medical Supplies offers for sale mobility aids, dressing aids, shower chairs, grab bars and diagnostic equipment. It also sells a range of incontinence products branded 'Dignity' – one of many product ranges of that kind with that name. Wade Ceramics is a manufacturer of porcelain that produces assistive tableware for use by people with cognitive, motor or visual impairments, which it likewise calls 'Dignity'. Among the items

[26] See Chapter 5. [27] See www.dignityboxes.co.uk/.
[28] See www.dignityincare.org.uk/About/The_10_Point_Dignity_Challenge/.
[29] Dignity Action Day 2023.

available are a two-handed cup and a plate with wide rims designed for people with dementia. Underscoring the fact that these pieces are made out of vitrified earthenware, the company quotes an expert in dementia services: 'If it's not a picnic, there should be no plastic.'[30] Yet another company makes a series of waterless shampoos and body washes to cope with difficulties affecting bathroom access that again carry the brand name 'Dignity'.[31]

As will be already evident from some of the issues on which I have just touched, aged care is a sphere in which dignity has particular prominence. *The Observer* once ran a campaign for 'Dignity at Home', posing the question 'Is dignity at home too much to ask for our elderly?'.[32] It was reported that 'hundreds of thousands of Britain's elderly rely on home care visits to live a dignified life ... But as local authorities reduce funding, an increasing number of our most vulnerable citizens are being neglected.' The example given was of a 72-year-old woman from Essex who was housebound due to severe arthritis, and suffered from incontinence. After reducing the number of baths to which she was entitled every week from two to one, the authorities had told her that even that was to end, and she would have to make do with a daily sponge-down. One reads of the reduction of all kinds of visits by care staff, so that '[m]ore and more of us are seeing this indignity ... inflicted on our elderly relatives'.[33]

Also germane to our theme is the sphere of workplace relations. At the university where I work, as in many other workplaces in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, there is a 'Dignity at Work Statement' which employees can consult if they wish.[34] The Statement proclaims the goal of promoting an 'enabling and inclusive environment where all staff are treated with dignity and respect', and assigns to managers responsibility for taking the lead in promoting a 'culture of dignity and respect'. In more detailed

[30] See www.wade.co.uk/general/benefits-of-our-assistive-dignity-tableware-for-alzheimers-and-dementia-sufferers/.
[31] The company's name is Dignity LC Services. See www.dignitylcservices.co.uk/.
[32] Jo Revill et al., 'Is Dignity at Home Too Much to Ask for Our Elderly?', *The Guardian*, 17 June 2008. See www.theguardian.com/society/2007/jun/17/longtermcare.politics.
[33] Ibid.
[34] London School of Economics and Political Science, *Dignity at Work Statement* (on file with the author).

sections, the Statement sets out 'expectations regarding appropriate behaviour', along with the means by which complaints of inappropriate behaviour can be addressed and resolved. Inappropriate behaviour is defined as 'any behaviour which is unwanted, unwelcome and undermines an individual's dignity at work', and is further clarified through a series of examples.

Given the phenomenon of statements such as this, we should not be surprised that dignity has high visibility in management consulting, executive coaching, conflict resolution, and related spheres. Donna Hicks is the author of *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* and *Leading with Dignity: How to Create a Culture that Brings Out the Best in People*.[35] Hicks writes in these books of her belief in the 'power of dignity' and its primordial significance in human relationships.[36] In her first book, she characterises dignity as the 'missing link' in our understanding of conflict resolution, and sets out a 'Dignity Model' that explains what dignity is, how our evolutionary programming leads us persistently to violate it, and what can be done to overcome that programming and honour the dignity which is everyone's birthright. In her second book, she shows how this model can be used by business leaders and others to build a team and develop an organisational culture oriented towards 'dignity consciousness'.[37]

Let me mention one final association of dignity, which takes us from the English word and its Latin root to the Arabic word conventionally translated as dignity: *karama*. A central concept in the Arab uprisings of the early 2010s, the word featured on protest banners and painted walls, as well as in videos, songs and writing. Asmaa Mahfouz is often held to have played a decisive role in mobilising the Egyptian protests with a video-blog that urged her compatriots: '[i]f we still . . . want to live in dignity on this land, we have to go down [to Tahrir Square] on January 25th'.[38] As Abdelwahab El-Affendi explained, the point was not just to demand jobs and bread. These uprisings were needed 'so that the people would deserve bread'; the uprisings were needed to

[35] Donna Hicks, *Dignity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) and Donna Hicks, *Leading with Dignity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
[36] Hicks, *Dignity*, xxi. [37] Hicks, *Leading with Dignity*, xi.
[38] The video-blog can be watched at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JW3m8uwcL4. On dignity in the Egyptian protests, see further Zaynab El Bernoussi, *Dignity in the Egyptian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

'[restore] the dignity of the people'.[39] It is notable that the Tunisian revolution is referred to as the 'Dignity Revolution' (*Thawrat al-Karama*), and that the tribunal of transitional justice later set up in that country was named the Truth and Dignity Commission (*Instance Vérité et Dignité*).

In February 2020, an event occurred in Jordan which brought back memories of the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, to which the Arab uprisings are often traced.[40] It involved a Jordanian street vendor, Anas al-Jamra, driven to take his own life in similar circumstances. Like Bouazizi, al-Jamra was being harassed by city officials seeking to exact unpayable 'licence fees', and as in the case of Bouazizi too, the officials were repeatedly confiscating al-Jamra's stock, leaving him without the means to support himself and his family. It was reported that the death of Anas al-Jamra 'highlights the struggle people face to earn a dignified living in Jordan . . . where many feel that wealth and opportunities are restricted to a privileged few'. A quotation from his great-uncle tells of how the dead man 'was very hardworking and responsible. He worked every day; sometimes he left the house at six in the morning and only came back at night after 10 . . . He just wanted to live with dignity.'

Three Facts about Dignity

That set of references and associations plainly reflects my own particular field of view. I attach no weight to it except insofar as it brings to notice three salient facts about dignity, which I would like us now to review and go into a bit more deeply. In the *first* place, dignity is not just an idea; it's not just in our heads, but is also performative, embodied and ineliminably relational – a social practice and a lived experience. The embodied aspect of dignity becomes immediately apparent if we inflect from the noun 'dignity' to the adjective 'dignified', variously defined in dictionaries as 'marked by dignity of manner, style or appearance', 'stately, noble,

[39] Quoted in Marc Lynch, 'The Big Think Behind the Arab Spring', *Foreign Policy blog*, 28 November 2011.

[40] Marta Vidal, '"He Just Wanted Dignity": The Tragedy That Captured the Mood of a Nation', *The Guardian*, 27 February 2020, available at: www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/27/he-just-wanted-dignity-the-tragedy-that-captured-the-mood-of-a-nation.

majestic', 'decorous, controlled, and calm' and 'having or showing a serious manner that is worthy of respect'. Giorgio Agamben advises that even the Latin and medieval concept of *dignitas*, which (as I will discuss further in the next chapter) was primarily a matter of elevated status or personage, also denoted the 'physical appearance' appropriate to that status or personage.[41]

When it comes to contemporary English, Andrew Sayer recalls that dignity is rendered in the language of posture, comportment, expression, orientation and cohesion. We speak of 'holding one's head up high' and 'meeting the other's gaze', of 'standing tall' and not 'stooping low', of 'saving face', 'keeping a level head', and 'maintaining composure'. Yet we also speak of people believing themselves to be 'above' certain things, which they consider 'beneath their dignity'.[42] To the extent that what may be communicated is an attitude of arrogance, haughtiness or snobbery, Sayer remarks that '[d]ignity can easily be confused with rank and dominance'.[43] Instead, the modern idea of dignity is supposed to signal an intrinsic attribute or quality which 'individuals have whatever their situation ... and regardless of whether others recognize it'.[44] If that puts one in mind of an empirical fact, the reality that dignity cannot be taken for granted applies more to some of us than to others, and more to all of us at some times of our lives than at other times. We speak of difficulties faced, and successes achieved, in keeping dignity 'intact'.

Sayer writes of a 'dance of dignity among people in the way they comport themselves in relation to one another'.[45] Beyond the question of how people behave, there is, then, the question of how others treat them. The practice of dignified treatment has received particular attention in fields such as medicine, nursing and social work, where interactions take place with people whose dignity is seen as especially fragile or precarious. I mentioned earlier the UK National Dignity Council's decalogue of Dignity Do's. This is an attempt to distil ideas in circulation about what it is for a doctor, nurse, social worker or other health or social care professional to treat someone they are looking after with dignity.

[41] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 67.
[42] See Andrew Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 205.
[43] Ibid., 211. [44] Ibid., 192. [45] Ibid., 192.

'Enable people to maintain the maximum possible level of independence, choice and control', is one Dignity Do. Among the rest are: 'treat each person as an individual'; 'listen and support people to express their needs and wants'; 'respect people's privacy'; 'ensure people feel able to complain without fear of retribution'; and 'assist people to maintain confidence and positive self-esteem'.

Harvey Chochinov has put these ideas at the centre of end-of-life care, outlining an influential model of palliative care which he terms 'dignity-conserving care'.[46] The model breaks down the issues affecting dignity into several categories, and identifies therapeutic interventions specific to each that can be made to conserve the patient's dignity. Finding ways to help the patient to live in the moment and maintaining normality to the maximum extent possible are examples of these. Jeannette Pols has studied dignity in a variety of health and social care systems and settings. In one paper, she presents the results of an investigation into care practices at two different institutional sites in the Netherlands: an innovative psychiatric hospital and a more traditional geriatric residential home.[47] In particular, Pols looked at how the nurses/carers in these respective settings handled patients/residents who did not want to wash or be washed. Did they force the patients/residents to wash or be washed, and on what basis did they decide this?

It transpired that the nurses at the psychiatric hospital did not force patients to wash. They said things like: 'I let her keep her dignity in the sense that I take it she will look after herself'. For them, '[w]ashing or not washing was … a private matter to be decided upon by the patient'.[48] By contrast, the carers at the geriatric residential home did force reluctant residents to be washed. They saw washing as part of the 'clean and well-kept appearance' which staff should help in maintaining, and said things like: 'It's out of bed in the morning, washing [so] that [the residents] look nice, and [so] that they [can] at least feel good about

[46] Harvey Chochinov, 'Dignity-Conserving Care – A New Model for Palliative Care', *Journal of the American Medical Association* 287(17) (2002) 2253. See further Harvey Chochinov, *Dignity Therapy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and, with a frame of reference extending beyond palliative care, Harvey Chochinov, *Dignity in Care* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[47] Jeannette Pols, 'Washing the Patient: Dignity and Aesthetic Values in Nursing Care', *Nursing Philosophy* 14(3) (2013) 186.

[48] Ibid., 192.

that. I find that really important, it's their sense of dignity'.[49] To be sure, there were limits to both approaches. The psychiatric nurses admitted that, at a certain point, they 'could no longer stand it', and would insist that a patient take a shower.[50] Equally, the geriatric care workers accepted that some residents were not accustomed to frequent bathing, and there was no need to 'get into a fight' every day.[51]

The general insight which Pols wants us to take from this research is that dignity has two aspects which together account for its meaning in these contexts. On the one hand, there is privacy in the sense of autonomy – the dignity that comes from self-command and from making decisions about your life for yourself. As she explains, the psychiatric nurses framed the subjects of their care 'as free individuals with equal rights such as the right to privacy. They actively helped their patients to develop and materially shape this individuality and protected [their patients] from interference that eroded their dignity.'[52] On the other hand, there is 'looking nice' – the dignity that comes from fitting in with social norms to do with what is pleasant and seemly and expressive of self-respect. It was of cardinal importance to the geriatric carers to '[create] sociality in the residential home', and in no relevant version of sociality was 'being dirty . . . a binding value'.[53] 'Cleanliness here is about relating to others, within the residential home and within the society at large, in which older people with psychiatric problems or dementia need to get a dignified place.'[54]

Talk of getting a dignified place points to a *second* fact about dignity. It is emergent, rather than predetermined or resolved. In many common usages, dignity denotes a quality, attribute or state of being, but we should not forget that it also denotes a process. There is always a question as to how, in particular circumstances, dignity is (or is not) produced. Illustrations of this abound in the substantial literature on dignity in the fields of anthropology, sociology, applied ethics and related disciplines. Interested in interactions between citizens and state officials, Alex Nading spent time with food-safety inspectors and the owners of food businesses they inspected in a district of Managua, Nicaragua. Anthropological studies of such bureaucratic interactions had tended to stress their

[49] Ibid., 193. [50] Ibid., 196. [51] Ibid., 195. [52] Ibid., 193.
[53] Ibid., 194, 197. [54] Ibid., 194.

character as threats to dignity. However, Nading witnessed encounters that could become dignified insofar as the parties joked with one another, and insofar as the owners of food businesses presented the inspectors with gifts that were graciously received. Whereas making light of things and accepting gifts might betoken incompetence or corruption on the part of an official, here they were means of 'building dignity into . . . governmental surveillance' by turning inspection into an activity that felt less like law enforcement, and more like participation in a shared effort to make 'cooking, selling, and bureaucratically accounting for food commensurable as forms of dignified work'.[55]

Ernesto Noronha and colleagues investigated dignity in the working lives of security guards in an Indian city.[56] Two groups of guards were encompassed: those employed at pavement kiosks with automated teller machines, and those who guarded the premises of large-scale commercial or industrial enterprises. How did experience at these different sites compare? While the ATM security guards told of poor working conditions and persistent vituperation from passers-by, the commercial and industrial guards described a dignity that came from being required to wear an ironed uniform, keep careful records of their patrols, not chat on the phone when on duty, and remain calm and polite in the case of an altercation. As Noronha and colleagues gloss it, 'dignity and discipline coalesced' in the lives of these guards.[57] This was reinforced by the 'recognition and respect' of others.[58] Unlike the ATM guards, the guards at the commercial and industrial premises were mostly treated courteously and with consideration in their daily interactions. They received training, saw their working conditions improve, and were invited to festive occasions at the premises they guarded. 'Disciplined soldiers' these security guards may in some sense have been, but it was also important that they were 'respected persons'.[59]

An occupation that is often seen as presumptively 'dignity-wounding', because it involves 'dirty work', is garbage collection.

[55] Alex Nading, 'Orientation and Crafted Bureaucracy: Finding Dignity in Nicaraguan Food Safety', *American Anthropologist* 119(3) (2017) 478, 480.
[56] Ernesto Noronha, Saikat Chakraborty and Premilla D'Cruz, '"Doing Dignity Work": Indian Security Guards' Interface with Precariousness', *Journal of Business Ethics* 162 (2020) 553.
[57] Ibid., 569. [58] Ibid. [59] Ibid.

Peter Hamilton and colleagues conducted field research among refuse collectors and street cleaners employed by a local authority in the north-east of England.[60] It emerged that the refuse collectors and street cleaners indeed had experience of offence. Members of the public would walk past them holding their noses or castigate them when they declined to pick up contaminated waste. Yet Hamilton and colleagues observed that the garbage workers did not consider themselves to be engaged in undignified work thanks to a series of self-representational narratives: the men – for they were all men – re-coded their negatively coded dirty work as positive by pointing up its social and environmental usefulness; they developed self-esteem through favourable comparison with alternative work, such as 'robotic' factory work; and they emphasised a form of 'heroic masculinity' that consisted of 'looking out for' vulnerable members of the community while doing their rounds, and always being willing to 'go the extra mile'.[61] Through these interlinked narratives, it is reported that the refuse collectors and street cleaners successfully imbued themselves and their work with dignity.

A more mixed account of dignity-production in the sphere of 'dirty work' is given by Jana Costas. Costas descended for a while into the 'corporate underworld' inhabited by cleaners at an upmarket mall in Berlin.[62] Highlighting invisibility as a key feature of this context, she explains how the cleaners worked at night and in the early morning, and how the zone designated for them was the building's basement, which could not be accessed by others working in the mall or the general public. Pertinent also to the cleaners' invisibility was that they reported to a contract cleaning company, rather than to the mall owner. Costas comments that when work is invisible, it is often valued less, and may come to seem undignified. The cleaners had ways of counteracting that – smiling confidently when they passed people in the mall, standing up for themselves in response to an unfair complaint, outwitting the surveillance measures by which their work was monitored – but lacking

[60] Peter Hamilton et al., '"Lower than a Snake's Belly": Discursive Constructions of Dignity and Heroism in Low-Status Garbage Work', *Journal of Business Ethics* 156 (4) (2019) 889.
[61] Ibid., 896, 890, 898.
[62] Jana Costas, *Dramas of Dignity: Cleaners in the Corporate Underworld of Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

an 'institutional anchor', their dignity was 'difficult' to maintain.[63] The basement zone often became a 'refuge from a landscape of indignities',[64] though there too the indignities could continue, especially for cleaners who faced racist and misogynistic slurs from co-workers, with little protection from managers.

In outlining the arrangements for cleaning at the mall, Costas notes that they followed the pattern that began to be established towards the end of the twentieth century, whereby companies and organisations turned to outsourcing as a strategy for reducing costs and increasing flexibility. Such information signals a *third* fact about dignity. It adverts to occurrences that are at once proper to themselves and enmeshed with the wider conditions affecting economy, society and culture. To reckon with dignity is necessarily also to reckon with the historical conjuncture of a particular time and place. Hence, in his study of Nicaraguan food-safety inspectors, Nading sets the bureaucratic routines he finds against the backdrop of received approaches to good governance and the legacy of 'structural violence inherent in a fractured state'.[65] Noronha and colleagues connect their discussion of the work of Indian security guards with literature detailing a decline in the country of high-quality manufacturing jobs and the advent of new forms of precarious employment.[66] And the *Observer*'s campaign for dignity at home in the United Kingdom references an austerity programme that involved sustained cuts to health and welfare spending, diminished financial support for local authorities, and the privatisation of procedures for assessing eligibility for benefits.[67]

When broader systemic conditions and trends are brought into the frame, challenges and achievements involving dignity no longer appear as purely personal or local concerns, and still less can they appear as the outcome of problems thrown up by evolutionary biology, as proposed by Hicks. Rather, we apprehend them as events within a conflictual social order. Attention is directed to the politics of dignity, its relation to developments in the organisation of capitalism, and to the whole range of issues, domains and analytical scales that bear on prevailing processes of social

[63] Ibid., 8, 117. [64] Ibid., 126.
[65] Nading, 'Orientation and Crafted Bureaucracy', 487.
[66] See Noronha, Chakraborty and D'Cruz, '"Doing Dignity Work"', 553.
[67] Jo Revill et al., 'Is Dignity at Home Too Much to Ask for Our Elderly?'.

production and reproduction. The Scottish charity Dignity Boxes implicitly evokes the politics of dignity when it distributes toiletries in areas with high levels of deprivation. So too does Anas al-Jamra's great-uncle when he laments the death of his young relative who 'just wanted to live with dignity'. The observation that life without dignity is hard and sometimes even intolerable reminds us that dignity has beneficial effects; it is an advantage – and some people have all, or almost all, the advantages. Thus, as succeeding sections of this book will discuss, dignity is a right, but also a privilege that maps with grim clarity the contours of our unequal world.

Thinking about dignity as political prompts the reflection, furthermore, that if our subject is dignity, it is indignity as well. Indignity is, of course, the antonym of dignity, yet there is a lot that we will miss if we approach indignity solely as dignity's opposite or deficient pair. We would be wrong to treat indignity as a simple lack of dignity to be filled or an absence of dignity awaiting presence, because indignity is a rich resource for studying dignity. As I have already mentioned, Ahmed's study of happiness is illuminating in this respect. She writes of the 'assumed transparency of the "un"' in 'unhappiness' – the presumption that unhappiness is the simple non-existence of happiness. What would it be to set aside that presumption, she asks, and 'listen to those who are cast as wretches'? Perhaps we might gain a 'different angle on happiness', and be led to understand it in unaccustomed ways.[68] Equally, we may gain a different angle on dignity by listening to those cast as undignified. With that reorientation may come new knowledge not only about what dignity is, but also about how it functions – its limitations and demarcations, its underpinnings and effects, and its methods and sometimes wily ways.

Katherine Newman conducted research with people employed at fast food outlets in New York City.[69] Newman was interested in the fast food workers as exemplars of the urban working poor, and one of the questions she set out to investigate was how they managed to maintain their dignity while doing a job that paid wages on which they could barely survive, and in some cases actually could not survive, and that was 'the butt of countless parodies and sarcastic

[68] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 17.
[69] Katherine Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

asides'.[70] The answer, for Newman, lay in the 'dignity of work'.[71] As the basis of that contention, she quotes statements from workers such as this: 'I'm not ashamed because I have a job. Most people don't and I'm proud of myself that I decided to get up and do something at an early age. So as I look at it, I'm not on welfare. I'm doing something.'[72] Newman also underscores the supportive role played by colleagues and managers, sharing this story from another worker: 'One night this little boy came in … and cursed me out. He [said], "That's why you are working [here]. You can't get a better job … ". I was upset … I started crying. [My manager] was like, "… [D]on't bother with him. I'm saying, *you got a job*. You know. It's a *job*."'[73] Newman concludes that her nation's working poor 'work hard at jobs the rest of us would not want because they believe in the dignity of work … [W]orking keeps them on the right side of American culture.'[74]

Or does it? Some years after Newman published her study, Carol Cleaveland interviewed welfare recipients in Philadelphia.[75] Her specific interest was in women who had refused work, quitting low-wage, low-status jobs to return to welfare, with supplementary help from charities, relatives and friends. Cleaveland describes hearing of repeated 'confrontations with authority figures at various job sites'. By her interpretation, such confrontations and the walk-outs that followed them 'afforded impoverished women the chance … to maintain [at least] the vestiges of a defiant dignity in the face of a hostile social order'.[76] These workers did not have the 'means of mounting a general challenge to the status quo, [but] they could challenge particular representatives of it'.[77] They could challenge the people who gave them enough break time only for a few puffs of a cigarette, or ripped off the sheets of an imperfectly made hotel bed. They could say no to those who offered them nothing other than insecure, dead-end employment at poverty-level wages. Cleaveland argues that, contrary to the assessments of analysts like Newman, 'very low-wage workers are not able to find dignity in virtually any job … Entrance into [the kind of worksites to which the women she interviewed were admitted] did not offer a

[70] Ibid., xiv. [71] Ibid., 304. [72] Ibid., 98.
[73] Ibid., 102 (emphasis in original). [74] Ibid., xv.
[75] Carol Cleaveland, 'A Desperate Means to Dignity: Work Refusal amongst Philadelphia Welfare Recipients', *Ethnography* 6(1) (2005) 35.
[76] Ibid. [77] Ibid., 48.

move to the "right side" of American culture …; rather [these women's] work experiences served notice of the chasm between themselves and more affluent Americans'.[78]

If Newman foregrounds the association of dignity with having a job, being self-reliant, and not depending on welfare,[79] Cleaveland's research brings into focus the defiant dignity of those who refuse such an understanding of dignity. The message we receive from her interviewees is that Newman's dignity – a familiar version to people in many societies today that presumably reflects, at least in part, the repudiation of earlier approaches to social protection – is ideology. It is a legitimising manoeuvre designed to mask both the *indignity* of low-wage, insecure, dead-end jobs and the *indignation* that can be witnessed on the part of the poor, mostly non-white, disproportionately female workers expected, and impelled by the lack of alternative employment opportunities, to do them. More than that, the message we receive is that this form of dignity *dignifies* such jobs with a status they do not deserve. 'Dignify' is an interesting word inasmuch as it sounds a note of caution about this noble or ennobling concept, dignity; it encourages a certain scepticism towards what is predicated. Perhaps respectability is just the decorous drapery of power. Perhaps respect is commanded only in the sense of being mandated by a higher authority. I want us to listen to that note of caution, and stay awhile with its reverberations.

The Messy Experiential

The points to be picked up so far are, then, that dignity is not just an idea, but also an embodied performance and interactive practice. Linked to that, it is not just an attitude, property or trait, but also a phenomenon in motion, the unfolding of a process. At the same time, it is not simply a private or individual issue, but also arises as part of a larger history characterised by social conflict and attempts to contain it through ideology. With regard to the uses to which dignity is put, we have seen that it may be simultaneously a principle of practical ethics, a revolutionary rallying cry, and a marketing device for products and services to be consumed in situations where dignity is deemed to be at particular risk. Dignity is a theme of

[78] Ibid., 55. [79] On this, see Chapter 2.

activism, policy and research on matters that include death, personal hygiene, social care, health care, sanitation, refuse collection, state bureaucracy and the conditions of work. The thrust of some of the research is to show how threats to dignity may be effectively defused; in other cases, indignity is called out, and we read of dignity as a depleted substance, unyielding but reduced to its vestigial remains.

The analyses of dignity to which I have referred suggest that it implicates both behaviour and treatment, and both respect for autonomy and conformity with convention. What these analyses also disclose are the deep social divisions – to use Cleaveland's word, the *chasms* of the social-structural landscape – that must be taken into account in any attempt to come to grips with dignity. Arlie Hochschild touches on something of this in *Strangers in Their Own Land*, her 'journey to the heart of the American right' published in 2016 and often cited in discussions of the context in which Donald Trump was elected US President in 2017.[80] Hochschild got to know supporters in Louisiana of the Tea Party movement of that time. After many conversations, she sums up feelings repeatedly expressed to her by white working-class people as follows. 'You are a stranger in your own land … It is a struggle to feel seen and honoured.' You might 'turn to your workplace for respect – but wages are flat and jobs insecure. So you look to other sources of honor. You get no extra points for your race. You look to gender, but if you're a man, you get no extra points for that either. If you are straight you are proud to be a married, heterosexual male, but that pride is now seen as a potential sign of homophobia – a source of dishonour.'[81] And on it goes.

Hochschild does not use the language of dignity in those passages. Rather, she writes of honour, pride and respect, mindful perhaps of the idea of dignity as an intrinsic form of worth that is distinct from socially conferred worth, and all the more so from the entrenched forms of social privilege ('extra points') to which her account alludes. In a more recent study, Vincent Lloyd also takes up the problem of entrenched social privilege in America, though from the opposite perspective of those struggling to put an end to

[80] Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016), xii.
[81] Ibid., 144.

it.[82] For him, dignity is precisely the right term to use when speaking of their struggle. I will return to Lloyd's work in the final chapter of this book. It suffices to mention now that he recovers a long history of African-American activism and thought which has put the concept of dignity at the centre of movements for Black liberation, whether in the context of abolitionism, civil rights, Black power, Black feminism, or, as today, Black Lives Matter. Drawing together the legacies of that history, Lloyd proposes that '[i]n a world that denies Black humanity and embraces racial domination, dignity names an affirmation of that humanity, which necessarily means struggle against domination'.[83]

Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb spent time with working people in Boston, Massachusetts during the early 1970s as part of an investigation into what they termed the 'hidden injuries of class'.[84] The report of their study fixes frequently on the subject of dignity, and its key conclusion in that regard is that there exists a gap between American 'public beliefs' about shared dignity and the equal claim of everyone to respect, on the one hand, and realities that bear little resemblance to the societal picture suggested by those beliefs, on the other.[85] Sennett and Cobb tell of how people on the lower rungs of the social ladder are not denied the 'possibility' of winning respect, but they are denied the 'presumption' of respect. They are denied 'some way of moving through daily life without being defensive and on guard, some way of being open with other people without being hurt'. The authors describe how the 'humbling of inferiors', well known to have been integral to the maintenance of status, hierarchy and order in pre-modern Europe, continues in liberal-democratic America in forms that are similarly oppressive, if 'at once less brutal and more insidious'.[86] Indeed, they characterise humbling as 'the most routine of modern

[82] Vincent Lloyd, *Black Dignity: The Struggle against Domination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

[83] Ibid., 2. On this, see also Norman Ajari (Matthew Smith, trans.), *Dignity or Death: Ethics and Politics of Race* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023). On the arguments of these books, see Chapter 6.

[84] Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York/London: W. W. Norton, 1972). The work of Pierre Bourdieu, and especially Pierre Bourdieu et al. (Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson et al., trans.), *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999), pursues a somewhat similar enquiry in a different time and place.

[85] Sennett and Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, 251.

[86] Ibid., 248.

occurrences'. They remark, however, that, unlike in the past, the system which sustains and is sustained by such occurrences 'goes itself into hiding', and attention falls squarely on the battle among individuals to become 'personally exempted from shaming and indignity'.[87]

Let me mention one final study, in which Imogen Tyler considers the denigration of working-class people in contemporary Britain. This phenomenon had earlier been described by Owen Jones with reference to the concept of the 'chav' – a term that came into currency during the 2000s to mock people with working-class origins as vulgar and undignified.[88] Tyler observes that one response to that kind of slur, one rebuttal, has been to insist on the reality of 'working-class dignity', and to point out that 'those in jobs paying little more than benefits' have a 'remarkably strong work ethic', that 'carers and cleaners [do] essential work well, despite lack of money or respect', and that so-called 'chav mums' are, in fact, 'willing to work'.[89] While acknowledging that the figure of the 'noble suffering worker' has facilitated the 'articulation of class solidarities' and the repudiation of class contempt, she argues that it has also sustained a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, and between 'honest hardworking families' and a 'parasitical, pathological underclass'.[90] To Tyler's mind, the answer to the demonisation of working people is not to provide evidence of a 'mismatch between . . . vilifying class names [chav and so on, on the one hand] and . . . [actual] working-class dignity', on the other. Rather, it is to challenge the 'forms of classificatory violence' that are expressed in, and carried forward by, those names. It is 'to understand how the [relevant] representations of self and other . . . are formed, and how they might be transformed'.[91]

How representations of self and other are formed, and how they might be transformed, is a big question, and a mark perhaps of the distance we have travelled in the foregoing, which is itself a mark of

[87] Ibid., 150 (emphasis omitted).
[88] Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2nd ed. 2016).
[89] Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 169–70 (quoting Polly Toynbee and referring also to Owen Jones).
[90] Ibid., 170. [91] Ibid. (quoting Jacques Rancière).

the span and scope of the issues, perspectives and phenomena that come into play when the question is posed of what it is to 'see dignity'. Dignity is a matter of how we are with ourselves, so to speak – the narratives we develop about our identities and our lives. (Remember the English refuse collectors and the Indian security guards.) But it is also a matter of what our encounters are like with others – how others behave towards us day-to-day, what we do, what we are allowed to do and to be. (Remember the psychiatric nurse saying 'I let her keep her dignity'.) Dignity is useless, but also essential. It is an ethical ideal, but also a management strategy and a funeral company. It can be ideological, but it is also defiant and oppositional – the struggle against domination. Dignity is a lofty concept, but, as this introductory chapter has tried to show, also a worldly one that is inextricably bound up (to borrow yet again from Ahmed) with 'the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and . . . the drama of . . . how we are touched by what comes near'.[92]

[92] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 22.