

Chapter 1

The Quest for Dignity

There is no cultural system, Western or non-Western, however new or however old, that fully lives up to the idea of human dignity.

Wood (2008: 64)

Abstract Dignity is a highly controversial concept. Few other terms have been used in so many settings with so many contradictory meanings. Political events in the Middle East have given dignity new meanings. Some analysts have gone as far as calling the revolutions and civil wars that have dominated this region in the early 21st century the ‘dignity revolutions’. With this book we want to show that the concept of dignity can be meaningfully employed in politics, philosophy and everyday life, if one is clear about its different meanings, and about which of those meanings to use in what context.

Keywords Dignity · Dignity revolutions

It is difficult to write about dignity. Few other terms have been used in so many settings with so many contradictory meanings.

On the one hand, it is proclaimed that dignity¹ can never be lost. ‘Dignity is inviolable’ is the first sentence of the German constitution, to give an example. On the other hand, movements around the world declare that they are on a mission to *acquire* dignity for their constituencies. From Syrian refugee girls (UNICEF 2015) to government commissions investigating the neglect and abuse of elderly residents in care homes (Age UK n.d.), politicians and activists have used the term to support their quests.

Swiss philosopher and novelist Peter Bieri (also known as Pascal Mercier) captured some of the mysteries of the term ‘dignity’ in his novel *Night Train to Lisbon*. The novel sees middle-aged teacher Gregorius abandon his post and travel to Lisbon. There he meets a former resistance fighter, João Eça, who lives in a

¹The terms ‘dignity’ and ‘human dignity’ are used interchangeably in this book.

nursing home. One day, João Eça is reluctant to receive Gregorius for their regular chess meetings.

When João Eça stood in the door of his room ... on Sunday, Gregorius saw in his face that something had happened. Eça hesitated before asking him in. It was a cold March day, yet the window was wide open....

Eça moved the pawns. 'I went in bed last night,' he said in a rough voice. 'And I didn't notice it.' He kept his eyes lowered to the board....

Gregorius made tea and poured him half a cup. Eça saw the look that fell on his shaking hands.

'*A dignidade,*' he said.

'Dignity,' said Gregorius. 'I have no idea what that really is. But I don't think it's something that gets lost just because the body fails.'

Eça botched the opening.

'When they led me to torture, I went in my pants and they laughed at it. It was a horrible *humiliation*; but I didn't feel I was losing my *dignity*. But what is it *then*?'

Did he believe he would lose his dignity if he had talked, asked Gregorius.

'I didn't say a word, not a single word. I locked away all the possible words in me. Yes, that's it: I *locked* them away and bolted the door irrevocably. So it was *impossible* for me to talk. ... I stopped acknowledging the torturers as actors. They didn't know it, but I degraded them. ...'

And if they had loosened his tongue with a drug?

He had often asked himself that, said Eça, and he had dreamed of it. He had come to the conclusion that they could have *destroyed* him with that, but they could never take away his *dignity* in this way. To lose your dignity, you had to *forfeit* yourself.

'And then you get worked up about a dirtied bed?' said Gregorius and shut the window. 'It's cold and it doesn't smell, not at all.' (Mercier 2009: 364–365)

João Eça believes that he kept his dignity during torture and that the torturers could never have taken it from him. Yet he also believes that he lost his dignity when he 'went in bed'. His chess partner Gregorius admits that he has no idea what dignity really means, but insists that it does not get lost when the body begins to fail. The interpretations of dignity that this short excerpt point to are already quite diverse. One is connected to willpower and effort (resisting torturers), the other is independent of either and refers only to the frailty of the ageing human body.

This book aims to illuminate the concept of dignity in the 21st century.² What does it mean in the West? What does it mean in the Middle East? And could there be a common understanding? Or is there a common essence? Our attempt to answer these questions from a Western perspective will be done from a broad base, which includes fiction, politics and everyday life (e.g. sports), as well as the philosophical literature. There are three reasons for doing so:

²For more information on our exact Western and Middle Eastern perspectives, please see Box 1.1 at the end of this chapter.

1. Using examples from a wide range of contexts highlights vividly why the concept of dignity is so contentious in the 21st century.
2. Dignity has become a popular topic in philosophy, and many excellent books that engage critically with a broad range of interpretations have been published recently.³ To add one that simply covers the same ground would probably not be very useful.
3. The concept is so important in everyday life, as the many examples will show, that the discussion is intended not just for a specialised audience, but general readers too.

One could ask: why draw a distinction between dignity in the Middle East and dignity in the West? Why not assume that we can agree on *one* universal concept, as envisaged by the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (UN 1948)? To make this assumption would be to ignore the continuing heated debates about the essence of dignity. It would also not make the concept any clearer. If one had to pack everything that people could mean by ‘dignity’ into one concept, that concept might become meaningless. Any serious effort to describe dignity therefore has to disentangle different meanings first, and only then ask whether some of these meanings could be reconciled.

While it may be desirable to strive for a universal understanding of dignity, in that it could facilitate intercultural dialogue, one of our reasons for writing this book is that dignity is too multifaceted a concept to be captured in one essence. Instead we strive to bring out the distinctions *within* Western concepts and then provide one Middle Eastern interpretation. This is necessary because dignity is one of the most controversial concepts of the 20th and 21st centuries. It has been described as powerful (Beyleveld and Brownsword 2001), yet useless and vague (Macklin 2003); arbitrary (Van Steendam et al. 2006), yet addictive (Wetz 2004); elusive (Ullrich 2003), yet widely used (Van Steendam et al. 2006); groundless (Rachels 1990), yet revolutionary (Wood 2008); of supreme importance, yet without reference point.⁴ And this is just a summary of Western academic debates (Fig. 1.1).

Within this confusion, one looks to the Middle East and realises that political events have given dignity new meanings. Some analysts have gone as far as calling the revolutions and civil wars that have dominated this region in the early 21st century the ‘dignity revolutions’ (Hassan 2011).

While rising food prices, poverty, unemployment and corruption have contributed to these uprisings, commentators in the region and around the world have spoken of a dignity uprising: ‘ordinary Tunisians, Libyans, and Egyptians themselves describe the heart of this moment as a revolution for dignity’ (Marquand 2011). ‘But the uprisings were not only about jobs and bread; as Sudanese intellectual Abdelwahab El-Affendi wrote, ... the revolutions were needed so that the

³We would recommend, for instance, Michael Rosen’s *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* for English-speaking readers and Peter Schaber’s *Menschenwürde* for German-speakers.

⁴Statman (2000: 536) refers to ‘legal discourse, in which, on the one hand, dignity is assigned supreme importance, but, on the other, it has no clear reference’.



Fig. 1.1 Judgements on the concept of dignity

people would deserve bread’ (Lynch 2011). The theme of restoring the dignity of the people pervaded the Arab uprisings. ‘Some will claim that the true, structural causes for these Arab revolts reside in the rising food prices or other objective economic factors. ... But that is not what the street interviewees and commentators tell us: they speak of Anger, of Pride, of Humiliation and Dignity’ (De Caeter 2011). Or, as Fukuyama (2012) put it in an editorial entitled *The Drive for Dignity*:

The basic issue was one of *dignity*, or the lack thereof, the feeling of worth or self-esteem that all of us seek. But dignity is not felt unless it is *recognized* by other people; it is an inherently social and, indeed, political phenomenon. The Tunisian police were treating Bouazizi⁵ as a nonperson, someone not worthy of the basic courtesy of a reply or explanation when the government took away his modest means of livelihood.

The concept of dignity (Arabic *karama*) has often been used to comment on events in the Middle East. While dignity hardly ever featured in previous uprisings around the world, it is a ‘core theme... of the Arab uprisings, which united Arabs

⁵On 17 December 2010, Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself in protest at the harassment and humiliation inflicted on him by a municipal officer and her colleagues. He died from severe burns 18 days later, without waking up from his coma. He was posthumously awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament (with four others), and the Times named him their person of the year for 2011. His death sparked protests in Tunisia that ‘legend ... has it ... kicked off ... the Arab Spring’ (Fukuyama 2012).

from Morocco to Oman' (Hashemi 2013b). Commentators speak of a collective 'assertion of self-dignity in the Arab world' (Ilan Pappé in Barat 2011) after 'decades of humiliation, despotism, and despair' (Hashemi 2013a: 229) (see also Khouri 2011). It is therefore the right time to look at the concept of dignity in the Middle East.

Illuminating the concept from both a Western *and* a Middle Eastern perspective will, we hope, also increase its clarity. While Western academic attacks on the concept might have a point (more in Sect. 2.5.1 on the 'vagueness' of dignity), the concept's power in everyday life is considerable, as are the potential tediousness and philosophical sophistry of any alternatives. The following brief excerpt from an Australian novel could help illuminate this point:

Girlie had a new English teacher, an untidy, pimply young woman named Miss Boatwright, whom she couldn't stand. She became as impatient as her mother, shooting up her hand to point out the teacher's errors, creating disturbances, generally being delinquent. At recess, she made fun of the half-moons of sweat that stained the armpits of Miss Boatwright's frocks.... Miss Boatwright's efforts at salvaging her dignity only made Girlie more scornful. (Jennings 1996: 112)

The reader is flooded with images by just four sentences: images of pupils, teachers, classrooms and, at another level, images of desolation and loneliness. They will see that the schoolgirl lacks kindness, empathy, generosity and compassion. They may feel sorry for the teacher or think she should have chosen a different profession. But any attempt to find another, equally powerful formulation to replace the phrase 'salvaging her dignity' is likely to be fruitless. The power of the paragraph lies in this term and all its connotations. 'Miss Boatwright's efforts at salvaging her right to respect for persons and their autonomy only made Girlie more scornful' just sounds dull and wearisome.

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Box 1.1 West? Middle East?

We are two authors from different cultures. One born and raised in Cologne, Germany and one born and raised in Hamadan, Iran. This gives us certain perspectives, but that is not the reason why the sub-title of the book is "Middle East and West".

We agreed this subtitle for three reasons.

First, the "Western part" of the book uses so many different, mostly Western sources, from Aristotle to Kant, from Iris Murdoch to Paul Auster, from European newspapers to Internet sports pages, from the German constitution to American court cases, from psychology to Catholicism that a more precise specification was not possible.

Second, the "Middle Eastern part" of the book relies almost exclusively on the Koran, a book which conquered the world from its Middle Eastern origins.

Third, the interpretation of dignity in light of the Koran presented in this book, is unusual, and could not be linked to either Shia or Sunni Islam interpretations.⁶ Bani-Sadr argues—using the Koran—that Western and Middle Eastern challenges today (e.g. the rise of ultra-right and populist movements in the West and the strong authoritarian tendencies within Islamic societies) have the same root: a distinction between “good power” and “bad power” His interpretation of dignity, on the other hand, assumes that power invariably results in domination and one cannot have “good domination” and “bad domination”, since domination is always a negation of human dignity and human rights.

In a conversation Bani-Sadr said: “It was around 40 years ago when I began my research for finding the roots of dignity in Western philosophy. That led me to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and his Oration of the Dignity of Man. He starts his treatise by stating: ‘Most esteemed Fathers, I have read in the ancient writings of the Arabians that Abdala the Saracen on being asked what, on this stage, so to say, of the world, seemed to him most evocative of wonder, replied that there was nothing to be seen more marvelous than man.’

The Arab man whom he is referring to is Ali, the fourth Caliph after the prophet Mohammed and the first Shia Imam in the 7th century. That led me to go back to the Koran and start my research about dignity and where, how and why the word is being used and what it actually means. There I found that all living beings have dignity and rights because they are created by God. To bring out the dignity in all beings requires that the discourse of power and domination is replaced by a discourse of freedom and independence.

My suggestion to thinkers within varies belief systems and discourses is to try to discover the discourse of freedom and independence, within their own belief system.”

Hence, the subtitle of this book is “Middle East and West” because the sources used cannot be traced to any more precise discourses (e.g. a solely Kantian approach or reliance on a Shia interpretation of the Koran).

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⁶Sunni and Shia Islam are the two major denominations of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims today are Sunni, with Shia being the majority only in the area of ancient Persia, e.g. Iran and Iraq. Members of the two denominations “have co-existed for centuries and share many fundamental beliefs and practices. But they differ in doctrine, ritual, law, theology and religious organisation.” For more information see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047709>.

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