### Impact – AT: Human Dignity - FMPS

#### The notion of human dignity is a trick of liberal discourse to reify the state’s elimination of the Other.

Mohammad 10 (MALEK HARDAN MOHAMMAD, “THE DISCOURSE OF HUMAN DIGNITY AND TECHNIQUES OF DISEMPOWERMENT: GIORGIO AGAMBEN, J. M. COETZEE, AND KAZUO ISHIGURO”, Office of Graduate Studies of Texas A&M University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, December 2010, http://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/ETD-TAMU-2010-12-8807/MOHAMMAD-DISSERTATION.pdf – WC-NAS)

This dissertation argues that the notion of human dignity is in fact a subtle discursive tool in the service of abusive power structures. The notion of human dignity is more a function of sovereign power than a deep and abiding concept in the service of human rights. Human dignity is vital to a state-compromised liberal discourse of individual autonomy and identity to the same extent that the value of cultural and hierarchical ―dignity has long been central to the more forthrightly abusive language of national identity and social class. Egalitarian human dignity is a mere variation on the same concept that has been variously but consistently defined by power, be it the dignity that means rank and distinction or the monotheistic dignity of the human‘s privileged but tormented relation to her Creator. The dissertation explores the philosophical and ethical paradoxes of a supposedly inherent human dignity that not only still needs to be proactively realized by the individual but has also to be recognized, guaranteed and protected by society. While I recognize the aspirations and the occasional effectiveness of the wellintentioned use of ―human dignity as a rhetorical tool to help disadvantaged populations, I seek to expose the underlying complicity between the notion of human dignity and a stifling power structure.

In order to capture several of the ideals that have been directly and indirectly linked to, and advanced under the rubric of, human dignity after the concept was first introduced by Immanuel Kant, I survey several fields including: human rights; ethics; moral philosophy; political science; psychology; literature and literary criticism. A general list of such dignity based ideals includes: intrinsic human worth; personal autonomy; acting in freedom from or against animal instinct; recognition of and respect for the other and demanding the same in return; self-assertion; demotion of personal interest in favor of responsibility, altruism and sacrifice; political consciousness, action and inclusion in a political community; claiming an identity; the need for creativity, originality, and authenticity. Based on this accumulative meaning, I argue that human dignity, in all its formulations, is a discourse that misrepresents the meaning of empowerment for modern citizens as they become interested more in political gestures and less in material profit. Running through most of the dissertation is a continuing effort to correct Giorgio Agamben‘s response to Michel Foucault‘s question about how the modern state endows its citizen with a political subjectivity and individuality and, by the same gesture, subjects him to a totalized system. I argue that it is the discourse of human dignity that makes possible a superficially individuated, but subtly and ultimately totalized, culture. This project also demonstrates, sometimes in a counter-intuitive way, how some of the ideals within the discourse of human dignity have worked in accord with nationalist, racist and other dangerous world views.

#### Turns Case – dignity based human rights only necessitates erasure of life outside the political and enables violent structures of state power.

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Moreover, a dignity-based human rights agenda is particularly counter-productive in negotiating and theorizing the condition of the stateless, the refugees, and other transient populations. Such an approach is doomed because it cannot escape a certain foundational philosophy of the political life. Intertwined, as we have seen, with the necessity of membership in a political community, human dignity is antithetical to the prospect of a post-national world and a post-normative ethics. Hannah Arendt‘s argument that ―human rights can again be meaningful only if they are redefined as a right to the human condition itself, which depends upon some belonging to some human community, the right never to be dependent upon some inborn human dignity which de facto, aside from its guarantee by fellow men, . . . does not exist‖ (Origins 439) replaces one problem with another. Human dignity is still the telos of politics in this formulation. Human dignity might not be inborn, for Arendt, but the guarantee of such dignity is the goal of political and collective action: human dignity depends on the work of a political community. The problem with this premise is that making human dignity the end of human rights necessitates an erasure of life outside the political, an abnegation of mere ―givenness.

Arendt‘s rejection of human dignity as the basis of rights while positing this ideal as the consummation of rights becomes a source of confusion. Seyla Benhabib, explaining Arendt, speaks of a core of dignity that simultaneously precedes and coincides with man‘s right to have rights. According to Benhabib, history has shown that the politically empowered usually do not protect the politically disempowered; therefore, the disempowered should first be recognized as having the moral right to have political rights. Arendt is interested in cultivating this first right, and it is this right she associates with human dignity; even when a person loses ―all the so-called Rights of Man, he should not lose ―his essential quality as man, his human dignity (Benhabib 57). The right to have rights is a ―moral claim to membership and a certain form of treatment compatible with the claim to membership (Benhabib 56). As we can see, whether it is as the origin of rights or the end of rights, human dignity encloses the human in the discourse of power, which privileges the concept of community. It is a normative ethics that cannot see the human as free from the bonds of community. Even when it is idealized as the equal representation of ideas by equal members, community politics will derive meaning exclusively from deep structures that mask privilege and hierarchy. Not only does human dignity derive from membership in the public discourse of a political community, but it contributes to such discourse, which ultimately binds the human to the mental constructs of power.

Even though Arendt adopts an anti-foundational approach to human dignity, her insistence on collective political discourse that ultimately leads to human dignity cannot escape the normative ethics of a dignity inscribed in group membership. Disappointingly, instead of looking forward to a new ethics divorced completely from the notion of human dignity, Arendt elects to play by the terms of sovereign power. As we have seen Serena Parekh put it, ―Arendt wants people to have the possibility of transforming themselves from mere givenness (zoē) into individuals with unique identities (bios); that transformation is only possible through acting and speaking with others in a public space‖ (39). Turning the transient into a politically involved citizen is an instance of the intersection between individuation and totalization.

To be sure, Arendt‘s emphasizes worldliness and political consciousness and action as antidotes to evidently problematic modes of thinking such as racial and cultural allegiances— part of being worldly is to claim citizenship of the world at large. A freedom-aspiring person, according to Arendt, attains her goal through singular action rather than associative sameness within a group. Arendt, following Bernard Lazare, refers to this person as the ―conscious pariah, one who refuses to assimilate and who always separates and rebels (Origins 67). Political action and rebellion, however, often descend into totalitarian and ideological group identity, as Arendt herself notes with regard to Zionism. For Arendt, Zionism started as a political idea that went awry when it sought a model in the western nation-state. Human dignity as group membership in a community is detectable in the notion of welcoming or hospitality. The terms are now being used in addressing transient issues, especially with regard to the mass movement of populations with the expansion of the European Union.

The discourse of dignity is also manifest in the concept of welcoming; to welcome somebody is to dignify her. But from Derrida‘s perspective, we only welcome those who are already conversant in the discourse of dignity. In his and Dufourmantelle‘s Of Hospitality (2000), a meditation on migrants and refugees, Derrida sums up the problem and contradiction in the discourse of hospitality in the inevitable fact that the right to hospitality is not extended to an individual, for this morality is ―inscribed in a custom, an ethos, and a sittlichkeit‖ (23). Just like the right to hospitality, dignity is inscribed in a sittlichkeit (an ethical life). In other words, it is attached to an established form of life such as family life, civil society or the state. It is extended by a family to a family; the foreigner receiving the hospitality is never without a ―proper name or a family (23). For Derrida, the ―foreigner we welcome is never the barbarian, the absolute other. The foreigner we welcome is expected to know the rules of hospitality, and that‘s why she receives it. By the time she receives the hospitality, the foreigner is already drawn into the discourse of the state. Therefore, because dignity is now lodged in a custom, it does not serve the purpose of addressing the real foreigner, who does not have a proper name or a family or a state. In the terms of hospitality, offshoots of the discourse of dignity, the host‘s offer implies an acknowledging by the guest. There is no place for the untranslatable zoē in the common discourse that brings them together. Dignity here is also based on an identifiable place of origin and a fixed place of arrival. In the discourse of dignity, the foreigner ceases to be foreign the moment he receives the hospitality. The discourse of human dignity is a major barrier on the way to unconditioned hospitality, if the latter is ever possible.

#### The notion of dignity is a form of state virtue representation that enables the survival of the state and shields the sovereign from the repercussions of enacting political violence.

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On the other hand, dignity—acquired through an image of popular revolt and violence— becomes the very means of preserving the power status quo and forestalling innovation and change. Walter Benjamin‘s distinction between ―constituting‖ power and ―constituted‖ power is helpful here. Benjamin, according to Agamben, ―presented the relation between constituting power and constituted power as the relation between the violence that posits law and the violence that preserves it‖ (Homo 40). Both forms of violence are part of a circular schema: law-positing violence (revolutionary, radical violence) becomes part of the law-preserving violence (the lawenforcing state). Agamben notes: ―If constituting power is, as the violence that posits law, certainly more noble than the violence that preserves it, constituting power still possesses no title that might legitimate something other than the law-preserving violence and even maintains an ambiguous and ineradicable relationship with constituted power‖ (Homo 40). Benjamin sees this hopeless circularity reflected in the work of representative bodies:

If the awareness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the juridical institution decays. An example of this is provided today by the parliaments. They present such a well-known, sad spectacle because they have not remained aware of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence . . . They lack a sense of the creative violence of law that is represented in them. One need not then be surprised that they do not arrive at decisions worthy of this violence, but instead oversee a course of political affairs that avoids violence through compromise. (qtd. in Agamben, Homo 28)

Benjamin laments the fact that legal institutions never remain faithful to their violent, democratic roots.

My argument, however, goes a step further; it is only to the extent that such institutions of sovereign power represent themselves constantly as attuned to their revolutionary beginnings that they hold on to the dignity that in turn guarantees their survival. Agamben‘s characterization of revolutionary violence as ―certainly more noble than the violence that preserves‖ the existing law betrays the role I see dignity playing in this paradoxical relation between the two forms of law. The ―noble‖ badge gives the creative violence immunity and turns it into an untouchable violence. Article Three of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen states that ―sovereignty resides essentially in the Nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.‖ Article Twelve states that ―security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are, therefore, established for the good of all and not for the personal advantage of those to whom they shall be intrusted.‖ The popular force that bestows mystique on this declaration then places force exclusively in sovereign power. The dignity of violence in a back-handed way shields sovereignty from potential violence.