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Kant on Dignity and Education

In this essay, Johannes Giesinger discusses the educational significance of Kant's conception of human dignity. According to Kant, Giesinger claims, children can and should be educated for dignity: on the one hand, children realize their dignity by developing the capacity for moral autonomy; on the other hand, this capacity can only evolve if children's sense for his own dignity – that is, their self-respect – is awakened. Educating children means, for Kant, helping them to develop a proper relationship with themselves and thereby become moral persons.

Dignity (*Würde*) is commonly considered to be a core concept of Kant's moral philosophy. The role of this concept in Kant's ethical thought is controversial, and its educational meaning is rarely discussed. At first glance, the concept of dignity does not seem to be of special importance to Kant's thoughts on education. In his *Lectures on Pedagogy*, dignity is not mentioned at all in those passages that have received the most attention. In this paper, however, I claim, that focusing on the educational meaning of dignity reveals a crucial feature of Kant's pedagogy – specifically, that Kant thought of education as a realization of dignity.

The idea that dignity can and must be realized might seem to conflict with Kant's understanding of the term. It is commonly assumed that Kant conceived of dignity as something that every human being possesses, simply by virtue of having the capacity for freedom and rationality. Indeed, Kant said that children should be seen as *persons* – not as *things* – because they are “endowed with freedom”¹. Since they are persons, the so-called Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative can be applied to them: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”². It has been proposed that this be taken as the basic ethical principle of education. Children should, according to this principle, be

¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6: 280. The volume and page number refer to the canonical *Akademieausgabe* [Academy Edition] of Kant's works. This work will be cited in the text as MM for all subsequent references.

² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Gregor, 4: 429. This work will be cited as GMM for all subsequent references.

educated as “ends in themselves”, and not used as mere means for the ends of others.³ In other words, their dignity should be respected.

This view corresponds to the common understanding of dignity in current philosophical debate; we usually think of dignity as a source of *claims* toward others. As Joel Feinberg puts it: “To respect a person then, or to think of him as possessed of human dignity, simply is to think of him as a potential maker of claims”⁴. Stephen Darwall takes up this notion of dignity as the (equal) standing to make claims, deriving it directly from Kant.⁵ The human being, says Kant in the passage to which Darwall refers, “possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* from all other rational beings in the world” (MM, 6:434-435).

Thus understood, dignity is nothing that must be realized. It is a given in every child and functions as the normative ground for respect in education. In the first section of this paper, I am going to sketch – drawing on the background of insights provided by Stephen Darwall and Oliver Sensen⁶ – an alternative reading of Kant’s account of dignity. This will lead me, in the second part, to take a closer look at Kant’s view of moral education.

Two Stages of Dignity

Darwall, after having reconsidered the crucial passages in Kant’s ethical works, is not sure any more whether his earlier interpretation of Kant’s account of dignity is fully correct.⁷ In some passages, Darwall notes, Kant ascribed a dignity to the morally good will, not to the human being as such. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant stated, first, that “morality, and humanity, insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity” (GMM, 4: 435). Here, Kant relates dignity to the *capacity* for morality, not to the

³ This has been proposed by the German educational philosopher Lutz Koch (“Wert und Würde in der Erziehung” [Value and Dignity in Education], *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik* 77, no. 1 (2001): 6-24; see also Koch’s book *Kants ethische Didaktik* [Kant’s Theory of Moral Education] (Würzburg: Ergon), p. 389. Koch adopts Kant’s account of moral education more or less as his own view. With reference to Kant, he sketches the idea of an “education for dignity” (“Erziehung zur Würde”). In this paper, I will make clear that this view is indeed in line with Kant’s account, and that it presupposes a two-stage conception of dignity (as well as two notions of respect).

⁴ Joel Feinberg, “The Nature and Value of Rights,” in *Rights, Justice, and the Bounds of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980), 151.

⁵ Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint. Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 243.

⁶ Stephen Darwall, “Kant on Respect, Dignity, and the Duty of Respect,” in *Kant’s Ethics of Virtue*, ed. Monika Betzler (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008); Oliver Sensen, “Kant’s Conception of Human Dignity,” *Kant-Studien* 100, no. 3 (2009): 309-331; Oliver Sensen, “Kant on Duties Toward Others From Respect (§§37-44),” in *Kant’s “Tugendlehre”. A Comprehensive Commentary*, eds. Andreas Trampota, Oliver Sensen, Jens Timmermann (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming).

⁷ Darwall, “Kant on Respect, Dignity, and the Duty of Respect”.

moral will. But shortly afterwards, he made clear that “the morally good disposition” (“*die sittlich gute Gesinnung*”) is the ground of dignity. It is not the mere capacity for “lawgiving”, but autonomous *practice* that is crucial here: “But the lawgiving itself, which determines all worth, must for that very reason have a dignity” (GMM, 4: 435).⁸

Darwall is also puzzled by a passage in the *Critique of Practical Reason* where Kant seems to presuppose a merit-based understanding of respect. There, Kant said that “before a humble common man in whom I perceive an uprightness of character in a higher degree that I am aware of myself *my spirit bows*”. And he went on to say: “Respect is a *tribute* that we cannot refuse to pay to merit”⁹. Thus, it might seem that it is moral merit, not humanity and personality, that grounds dignity and respect. It could be concluded that criminals – and all persons who fail to act morally – do not deserve respect. With regard to pedagogy, it becomes open to doubt whether children who are not yet full-blooded moral agents must be seen as addressees of respect.

With these passages in mind, we can turn to an often neglected part of Kant’s *Lectures on Pedagogy*. In a short section on the duties to oneself, Kant mentioned the term “dignity” several times: These duties, Kant said, “consist in the human being having a certain dignity within himself which ennobles him before all creatures, and it is his duty not to deny this dignity of humanity in his own person”¹⁰. Here, Kant first spoke of the dignity of the human being as such. Just by being human, it seems, human beings have a dignity; that is, they are “ennobled” among the other creatures in the world. This special status in nature, however, does not give rise to rights in the first place. As Kant stated, it yields a duty – the “duty not to deny his dignity.”¹¹

Kant then elaborated on what it means to deny one’s own dignity:

[W]e deny the dignity of humanity when we, for example, take to drinking, commit unnatural sins, practice all kinds of immoderation, and so forth, all of which degrade the

⁸ See also Paul Guyer’s reading of this passage in his article, „Kant on the Theory and Practice of Autonomy,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20, no. 2 (2003), 88.

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in: *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Gregor, 5: 77. This work will be cited in the text as CPR for all subsequent references.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Pedagogy* (1803), in: *Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9: 488. This work will be cited in the text as LP for all subsequent references. It should be mentioned that the pedagogical lectures were not written by Kant himself, but edited by Theodor Rink based on materials that Kant used for his lectures.

¹¹ Koch (“Wert und Würde in der Erziehung,” 19) affirms that Kant develops a duty-based understanding of dignity. He states that for Kant, dignity is not given as an inborn property, but has the character of a task or duty. As I claim, dignity must be seen as something “given”, as well.

human being far below the animals. [...] [T]he child can indeed also degrade itself below the dignity of humanity through lying, since the child is already able to communicate its thoughts to others. Lying makes the human being an object of universal contempt and is a means of robbing him of the respect and credibility for himself which everyone should have (LP, 9: 488).

To deny one's dignity means, according to this passage, to *degrade* oneself. Human beings who are initially *ennobled* before the animals lose their elevated status when they act against their duty and thereby fall "far below the animals". By neglecting their duties to themselves, they lose their dignity. They forfeit the respect of others and become an object of "contempt" ("*Verachtung*"). Moreover, it becomes impossible for them to respect themselves; however, self-respect - or self-esteem - is something that "everyone should have".

In this section of the *Lectures on Pedagogy* - and in the passages that Darwall points out - dignity and respect seem to be a question of moral merit. It is the agent who acts in accordance with his duties to himself who is the appropriate addressee of respect. On the other hand, however, this passage also makes clear that human beings have a basic dignity that is independent of merit. But this dignity, it seems, can be diminished by our conduct.

According to Oliver Sensen's reading of this and similar passages, Kant developed a two-stage conception of dignity, which includes an "initial dignity" and a "realized dignity."¹² Human beings are ennobled in nature because of their free will, and this provides them with an initial dignity. As Kant stated in the "Doctrine of Virtue" of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, this basic dignity is "inalienable" (MM, 6: 436). Thus, people who fail to act in accordance with their dignity still preserve this basic dignity and the normative standing to claim respect from others. Kant specified that "I cannot deny all respect to even a vicious man as a human being; I cannot withdraw the respect that belongs to him in his quality as a human being" (MM, 4: 463). In spite of this, those human beings who fail to realize their dignity become an object of contempt. We must assume that in such cases, a second type of respect comes into view - a kind of respect that is not based on the other's humanity or personhood, but on the person's moral merit. Darwall calls this "appraisal respect" - as distinguished from "recognition respect."¹³ Thus, the "humble common man" who has a moral will is an addressee of appraisal respect, whereas the criminal is not. Both, however, deserve a basic form of moral respect that is independent of merit.

The basic form of dignity with which every human is endowed gives rise to a duty. It is a duty to realize one's dignity. Basic dignity can be ascribed to free persons, and it is because

¹² Sensen, "Kant's Conception of Human Dignity."

¹³ Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (1977): 36-49.

of their freedom that they have the ability to realize their dignity by themselves. Their freedom provides them also with the opportunity to deny their dignity in their behaviour.

As Sensen states, this way of thinking about dignity can be traced back to the philosophy of the ancient Stoa. He calls this the “traditional conception” of dignity and distinguishes it from the “contemporary conception” that is commonly ascribed to Kant.

The main features of the traditional conception are present in the passage from *Lectures on Pedagogy*: (1) In contrast to the contemporary view, the traditional conception regards dignity as a two-fold notion; (2) dignity is duty-based, not rights-based; (3) it gives rise to duties to oneself; and (4) dignity arises from the “ennobled” status that the human being has in nature, not from his “absolute value”. The contemporary view, as Sensen describes it, takes dignity as a “non-relational value property”¹⁴ that plays a foundational role in moral thought. Thus, it is the absolute worth of the human being that gives rise to respect. Sensen argues that Kant’s view is different: Kant “always refers to the Categorical Imperative as the supreme principle of morality; and when he tries to justify the imperative, he does not rely on a conception of worth or dignity”¹⁵. Thus, for Kant, the law (or “the right”) is theoretically prior to the good. According to this reading, the good will has absolute or unconditional worth because it is guided by the law.

Sensen is not the only one who sees a connection between Kant’s philosophy and Stoic thought. Reinhardt Brandt claims that Kant’s use of the term *Bestimmung* (vocation, destiny, or calling) has its roots in Stoic philosophy. According to Brandt, this term expresses a teleological conception of human nature.¹⁶ I will not discuss whether Sensen or Brandt are fully right, in a historical sense; what matters most here is that applying their views to Kant’s writings reveals aspects of his thought previously overlooked. Many features of his philosophy can be better understood when seen in the light of Stoic patterns of thought.

With respect to pedagogy, for example, it is of utmost importance to look more closely at Kant’s use of *Bestimmung*, since he used this term – along with similar terms – frequently in the introduction of the pedagogical lectures.¹⁷ There, Kant described the process of education as an overcoming of the child’s animal nature. Those human beings who acts in

¹⁴ Sensen, “Kant’s Conception of Human Dignity,” 313.

¹⁵ Sensen, “Kant’s Conception of Human Dignity,” 331. Similarly, Dietmar van der Pfordten writes: “Dignity is not the ultimate reason for ethical obligation” (“On the Dignity of Man in Kant,” *Philosophy* 84, no. 3 (2009), 385). Von der Pfordten’s examinations start from the insight that the concept of human dignity is not introduced in those passages of the *Groundwork* that lead to the Formula of Humanity. According to Von der Pfordten’s reading, dignity is grounded in the human capacity for self-legislation, that is, autonomy: “Self-legislation, the Autonomy of Man, is, as an essential consequence of the Freedom of Will, the central source of the normativity in Kantian Ethics. In the context of a Kingdom of Ends this self-legislation constitutes the Dignity of Man” (ibid.).

¹⁶ Reinhard Brandt, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen bei Kant* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007).

accordance with his animal nature fail to realize his true human nature – their *Bestimmung*. Animals, Kant believed, have their own destiny, with which they instinctively live in accordance. The human being, by contrast, “needs his own intelligence. He has no instinct and must work out the plan of his conduct for himself” (LP, 9:41). Because human beings are not determined by natural laws, they can and must realize their destiny by themselves. The freedom that human beings possess, however, give them the opportunity to deviate from their destiny.

Just as Kant ascribed a *Bestimmung* to the human being, he ascribed to him a dignity, independently of their behavior. However, through their actions, human beings can either realize their dignity and destiny – or fail to realize it. So, we can distinguish an inborn dignity and destiny from a fully realized dignity and destiny. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* – in a passage previously mentioned – Kant spoke of the human destiny as well as his dignity (GMM, 4:35). What, he asked, does it justify to ascribe a dignity to the “morally good disposition”? Kant answered as follows: “It is nothing else than the *share* it affords a rational being *in the giving of universal law*, by which he makes him fit to be a member of a possible kingdom of ends, which he was already destined to be by his own nature (*wozu es durch seine eigene Natur schon bestimmt war*) as an end in itself.” So, here, dignity is identified with moral lawgiving and it is said that human beings are *destined* (*bestimmt*) to be lawgivers by their nature. The expression “by his own nature” is further elucidated by the phrase “as an end in itself”. Thus, the human beings’ (rational) nature makes them ends in themselves and provides them with a certain destiny – the destiny to become morally autonomous.¹⁸

From this passage, we can conclude that the human destiny – and the human dignity – are realized by developing moral autonomy.¹⁹ In addition, the passage from the pedagogical lectures cited earlier highlights one specific type of duties – one’s duties to oneself. It is said that a person loses his or her dignity in acting against this kind of duty. It must also be noted that Kant often spoke of dignity in the context of duties to oneself. One of Kant’s best-known clarifications of the idea of dignity can be found in the section “On Servility” (“Über Kriecherei”) of the “Doctrine of Virtue” (MM, 6: 434). The person who shows a “servile spirit” towards others violates his or her own dignity and neglects a duty

¹⁷ The role of the term *Bestimmung* in Kant’s educational thought is also illuminated by G. Felicitas Munzel, “Kant on Moral Education, or “Enlightenment” and the Liberal Arts,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 57, no. 1 (2003), 43-73.

¹⁸ The human being is, in this sense, “destined to determine himself” (“*bestimmt zur Selbstbestimmung*”), as Brandt (*Die Bestimmung des Menschen bei Kant*, 15) puts it, thereby taking up a formulation coined by Fichte.

¹⁹ In the *Groundwork* (4:440), Kant defines autonomy as “the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition)”.

to the self. Lying, too, is taken as a duty of this kind, as the “Doctrine of Virtue” affirms: In it, Kant asserted that lying is the “greatest violation of a human being’s duty to himself” (MM, 6: 429). The liar, he says, in accordance with the passage from *Lectures on Pedagogy*, “makes himself contemptible in his own eyes and violates the dignity of humanity in his own person” (MM, 6: 429).

At the start of the first part of the “Doctrine of Virtue”, Kant stated that the duties to oneself play a fundamental role in morality: If there were no such duties, he said, there would be no duties toward others: “For I can recognize that I am under obligation to others only insofar as I at the same time put myself under obligation, since the law by virtue of which I regard myself as being under obligation proceeds in every case from my own practical reason” (MM, 6: 417). Kant thus assumed that the moral law can be found (*a priori*) within one’s own reason. Recognition of the moral law is necessary to regard oneself under obligation. Thus, the source of one’s obligation lies within oneself, and the *feeling* of obligation can only arise if one recognises this source for what it is. This feeling that is brought to life by the moral law is called respect (*Achtung*).

The concept of respect is introduced in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant described respect as a feeling different from other feelings and inclinations.²⁰ Like other feelings, it is part of the empirical world. In contrast, however, it has its source in the non-empirical realm. “The object of respect is [...] simply the law”, according to Kant, and respect is “the *effect* of the law on the subject” (GMM, 4: 402). The feeling of respect thus provides a link from the empirical sphere to the sphere of reason where the moral law is situated. On this background, Kant makes a statement that reveals a basic feature of his moral philosophy: “Any respect for a person is properly only respect for the law” (GMM, 4: 402). Respect is, according to our common use of the term, directed at *persons*; however, Kant claimed that the primary object of respect is not a person, but the law. The person is respected because the person is a bearer of the law.

To become moral agents, human being must, first of all, recognise the moral law – that is expressed in the Categorical Imperative – *within themselves*. Only if they respect themselves (that is, the moral law within themselves) can they come to see that they has an obligation to respect others. All duties, including duties towards others, have thus their origin in a specific kind of self-relationship – respect for the moral law within oneself. So it can be seen

²⁰ In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, he first takes up the notion of respect as a feeling. He says that “it is not correct to say that a human being has a *duty of self-esteem* (*Pflicht der Selbstschätzung*); it must rather be said that the law within him unavoidably forces from him *respect* for his own being, and this feeling (which is of a special kind) is the basis of certain duties” (MM, 6: 402-03). The term *Selbstschätzung*, translated as “self-esteem”, means nothing else than self-respect (respect for his own being – *Achtung für sein eigenes Wesen*). Later, Kant nevertheless refers to a duty of self-esteem, saying: “But just as he cannot give himself away for any price (this would conflict with his duty of self-esteem), so neither can he act contrary to the equally necessary self-esteem of others” (ibid., 6: 462).

as the primary duty of persons to establish a proper self-relationship. Only if one lives in accordance with this basic “duty to oneself” can one become a truly moral agent.²¹

The educational significance of all of this is clear. Children are born endowed with a basic dignity. This basic dignity can be seen as a source of legitimate claims, but first and foremost, it yields a duty – the duty to realize one’s dignity fully and thereby reach one’s destiny. The realization of the child’s dignity or destiny consists in becoming morally autonomous. Obviously, Kant did not think that the realization of dignity can be left to children themselves. As he said in the pedagogical lectures, “[t]he human being can only become human through education. He is nothing except what education makes of him” (LP 9: 443). So the development of autonomy – the child’s “moralization” – can and must be fostered educationally. We can thus speak of an “education for dignity” that is identical with moral education. But how did Kant conceive of moral education?

Moral Education and Dignity

The autonomous agent acts out of his own cognitive insight into the moral law and is motivated by this law. It is *respect* for the moral law that motivates the person to act morally. Acting out of respect for the moral law is, for Kant, tantamount to acting from duty. Only those actions that have their springs in duty have moral worth, according to Kant.

The problem is how the capacity for autonomous agency can be brought about by education. On the one hand, Kant stated that children must be disciplined because otherwise their animal nature would lead them to deviate from their destiny. On the other hand, discipline, coercion, punishment or training tend to *spoil* the development of autonomy (LP 9: 475). Children who are forced or trained to act morally do not do so from their own rational insight and are hindered from developing “intrinsic” moral motivation.

Kant’s basic idea is that children should be prompted to find the moral law *within themselves*.²² The maxims of moral acting, he said in *Lectures on Pedagogy*, “must originate from the human being himself”, that is, “from the human being’s own understanding” (LP 9: 477). Thus, moral rules should not “filled into” the child from without, but extracted from the child’s reason: “In the formation of reason, one must proceed Socratically. For Socrates,

²¹ See also Sensen, “Kant’s Conception of Human Dignity”, 316.

²² See also Koch, *Kants ethische Didaktik*, 375f. For a different reading of Kant’s account of moral education, see Paul Formosa, “From Discipline to Autonomy: Kant’s Theory of Moral Development,” in *Kant and Education. Commentaries and Interpretations*, eds. Chris Surprenant, Klas Roth (London: Routledge, forthcoming). According to Formosa, the catechetical (or Socratic) method does not provide access to the moral law that is pre-given within every human being. This method, rather, makes explicit the moral knowledge that has been acquired in processes of socialisation.

who called himself the midwife of his listener's knowledge, gives in his dialogues [...] examples of how, even in the case of old people, one can bring forth a good deal from their own reason" (LP 9, 477).

In the section on the "Doctrine of the Methods of Ethics" at the end of the "Doctrine of Virtue", Kant distinguished between the *dogmatic*, the *catechetical* and the *Socratic* methods of moral teaching. He was opposed to the dogmatic method where the pupil merely listens to the teacher. The Socratic procedure is, in Kant's description, truly dialogical. Both the teacher and the pupil ask questions and give answers. Children, however, are not yet capable of asking questions, according to Kant. This is why moral teaching has to proceed catechetically, that is, with the pupil answering the teacher's questions. Kant said that catechism, in contrast to dialogue, addresses to the pupils memory, not to his reason (MM, 6: 478).²³ He went on to explain that "the answer which [the teacher] methodically draws from the pupil's reason must be written down and preserved in definite words that can easily be altered, and so be committed to the pupil's memory" (MM, 6: 479). So, initially, the answers must be given by the pupils themselves who use their own reason. These answers, however, must later be memorized and repeated by the pupil. In addition to these considerations regarding the moral catechism (that are originally entitled "*Ethische Didaktik*"), Kant developed an "Ethical Ascetics" ("*Ethische Asketik*"), that is, a doctrine concerning the exercise of virtuous conduct.

But let us leave this aside and turn to an important section from the *Critique of Practical Reason* from which direct connections to the considerations of the first section of this essay can be drawn.²⁴ In that section entitled "Doctrine of the method of pure practical reason", the role of dignity and self-respect in moral education is illuminated. Here, Kant was primarily concerned with the question of how a truly moral motivation can be developed educationally. His issue is "the way in which one can provide the laws of pure practical reason with access to the human mind and *influence* on its maxims, that is, the way in which one can make objectively practical reason subjectively practical as well" (CPR, 5: 151).

Kant's idea is that children should get acquainted, mainly through the narration of morally relevant courses of action, with the *pure moral motive*. By presenting to children

²³ Chris Surprenant sees the catechetical method as the core of Kant's account of moral education ("Kant's Contribution to Moral Education: The Relevance of Catechetics," *Journal of Moral Education* 39, no. 2 (2010): 165-174.)

²⁴ It is unclear how the two methodological "Doctrines" - in the second *Critique* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* - are related. Lutz Koch (*Kants ethische Didaktik*, 383) makes the proposal to combine the basic points of the two chapters. This leads to the idea that moral education, as Kant conceives of it, proceeds in three steps: 1) the catechetical presentation of moral knowledge ("*Ethische Didaktik*" from the *Doctrine of Virtue*); 2) the awakening a sense of dignity to foster the development of truly moral motives (Methodological doctrine from the *Critique of Practical Reason*); and 3) the practising of moral virtue ("*Ethische Asketik*" from the *Doctrine of Virtue*).

stories in which persons act from a purely moral motive, he thought, children can be brought to develop this kind of motivation as well. This, said Kant,

teaches the human being to feel his own dignity – gives his mind power, unexpected even by himself, to tear himself away from all sensible attachments so far as they want to rule over him and to find a rich compensation for the sacrifice he makes in the independence of his rational nature and the greatness of soul to which he sees that he is called [... *die Unabhängigkeit seiner intelligibelen Natur und der Seelengrösse, wozu er sich bestimmt sieht*]²⁵. (CPR, 5: 152)

In this passage, Kant connected the development of the moral motive, on the one hand, with the fostering of self-respect, as the feeling of one's own dignity, on the other. Self-respect is the respect for oneself as a bearer of the moral law – it is a feeling that is created by the moral law that resides within oneself. A person's action is truly moral when it is motivated by his or her respect for the moral law. That is why fostering self-respect and developing a moral motive go hand in hand: to become morally motivated, the agent has to recognize the moral law within him- or herself. This, however, is tantamount to developing a sense of one's own dignity, and when agents become aware of their dignity, they feel a special kind of power to act independently from their inclinations.

The term "dignity", as it is used here, refers to the basic dignity of every human being. Everyone can find the moral law presupposed in his reason, but not everyone is in fact aware that he is a bearer of the moral law. Children in particular might be unaware of their own dignity. This is why the educator must attempt to awaken their sense of self-respect and thereby create the motivation to realize their dignity. Realization of the child's dignity is the aim of education.

Note that, in this passage, Kant connects the notions of dignity and *Bestimmung*. Kant says that the person who starts to feel his own dignity develops a sense of his calling; he feels that he is being called (*bestimmt*) to become fully independent of natural influences and to act on the moral law. Thus, the insight into one's own dignity is, at the same time, an awareness of one's calling.

Kant provides further elucidation of these ideas. He says that the narrative presentation of moral examples leads children to recognize their inner freedom (CPR, 5: 161). Here, we should keep in mind that Kant states, in the second *Critique*, that our (transcendental) freedom is presupposed in our awareness of the moral law (CPR, 5: 30). Thus, we first grasp the moral law – as a "fact of reason" (CPR, 5: 31) – and then are led to the idea that we must be transcendently free, that is, free to act independently of the causal laws of nature. So, by fostering the consciousness of the moral law in children, we also lead them to recognise

²⁵ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 152.

their freedom. “And now”, Kant concluded, “the law of duty, through the positive worth that observance of it lets us feel, finds easier access through the *respect for ourselves* in the consciousness of our freedom” (CPR, 5: 161). Here, he repeats that the fostering of self-respect cannot be separated from the development of moral motivation. He explained:

When this is well-established, when a human being dreads nothing more than to find, on self-examination, that he is worthless and contemptible (*geringschätzig und verwerflich*) in his own eyes, then every good moral disposition can be grafted onto it, because this is the best, and indeed the sole, guard to prevent ignoble and corrupting impulses from breaking into the mind. (CPR, 5: 161)

Developing self-respect, as the subjective awareness of one’s dignity, yields a motivation to realize one’s dignity (or destiny). People who are motivated to deploy their potential for dignity are described as those who do not want to lose their self-respect or dignity. He dreads finding themselves worthless in their own eyes. Here, Kant presupposed a merit-based understanding of self-respect. According to Kant, then, those who fail to realize their dignity because they acted wrongly feel a merit-based form of contempt for themselves. Although they thereby degrade themselves “far below the animals”, they do not lose their basic dignity. They are still bearers of the moral law, and the recognition of this law can revive their self-respect and bring about a truly moral motivation.

Concluding Remarks

What role can the concept of dignity play in educational thought? According to the common understanding of the term, dignity functions as a normative source of the child’s claim for respect. We might assume that this implies, among other things, a claim for an appropriate education. On the other hand, the idea of dignity might also work as a normative constraint on educational interferences.

With regard to the current debate on dignity, an additional element should be mentioned: it is common to assume that a person’s self-respect is undermined by experiences of disrespect and humiliation, or – expressed in a positive way – that humans need respect (or recognition) in order to develop a sense of self-respect.²⁶ This empirical assumption is educationally salient: it might be taken as an educational aim to foster the child’s capacity for self-respect. The only way to do this, according to the view just outlined, is to respect the child.

²⁶ See, e.g., Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) or Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition [Kampf um Anerkennung, 1992]* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

Kant would agree that the child should be respected. Nevertheless, if we rely on his account of dignity, we come to fundamentally different conclusions concerning the educational significance of the term. According to Kant, the child's basic dignity yields a duty to realize this dignity. The realization of dignity is tantamount to the development of moral autonomy. Education, thus, has the function to support the realization of dignity by fostering the development of the capacity for autonomy. According to Kant, the children find moral knowledge and the truly moral motive within themselves. What educators can do, then, is to prompt children to become aware of what already exists within themselves. This leads children to recognize the moral law within themselves, and thereby awakens his sense of dignity. This feeling of self-respect goes hand in hand, according to Kant, with truly moral motivation.

Thus, *first*, the child's dignity is realized by moralization, and *second*, the process of moralization relies on the awakening of a sense of dignity. In other words, the process of moralization and the realization of dignity are one and the same. At the heart of Kant's account of education, we could say, lies the idea that the educator should support children in establishing a proper self-relationship – respect for themselves.

In a first step towards this end, children must become aware of their basic dignity, that is, the moral law within themselves and their transcendental freedom. We might speak of a basic form of "recognition self-respect" that corresponds to the basic dignity of persons and is independent of moral merit. A person's basic dignity yields a duty to fully realize this dignity. Basic self-respect, on the other hand, awakens the *motivation* to realize one's dignity and to become an addressee of appraisal respect and appraisal self-respect. As soon as children recognise their basic dignity, they dread nothing more than to behave in a way that makes them an object of appraisal contempt and appraisal self-contempt.

Thus, for Kant, children's dignity and self-respect are not endangered, in the first place, by other people's conduct. Kant neglected the empirical connection between social experiences of disrespect and the development of self-respect. He thus denied that a person's self-conception depends, in an essential way, on the moral quality of his or her social relations. On the other hand, however, he brought into view an idea that is mostly neglected in the contemporary discourse on dignity: Kant thought that persons forfeit their self-respect primarily through their own acting, that is, by deviating from the moral law. This idea does not depend on Kant's view of reason or the *a priori* character of the moral law; it is common to our everyday understanding of morality.²⁷ This, I think, is a point

²⁷ Christine Korsgaard (*The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)) takes up this point in her Kantian account morality, using the notion of a practical identity or a normative self-conception. A person's practical identity, she explains, can be understood "as a description under which you value yourself" (*ibid.*, p. 101). The person who acts against the moral standards that constitute her identity is in danger of losing this identity.

where Kant's view can inspire the contemporary debate on the educational significance of dignity and self-respect.

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