

AUTONOMY AND DIGNITY

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Introduction

Like the ‘thoughts and prayers’ so commonly offered by politicians in the aftermath of disaster, it is incredibly common to hear ‘autonomy and dignity’ invoked together in response to some threat to human wellbeing. To give just a few recent examples: an objector to the displacement of homeless people from an encampment in LA argues that the alternative interim shelters “requir[e] those experiencing homelessness to trade their autonomy and dignity for a bed” (Roy, 2021); in response to the increasing prevalence of surveillance in work-from-home situations, director of the UK anti-surveillance charity Big Brother Watch claims “It’s important for people’s sense of autonomy and dignity [...] that the home remains a private space” (Moody, 2021); in the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine, we are advised by a bioethicist “it’s vital [the vaccines] are given in a manner that respects the autonomy and dignity of older members of the community” (Symons, 2021); and in the aftermath of a new form of welfare payment in Australia, a local charity warns it will lead to “the erosion of individual autonomy and dignity” (Stewart, 2021).

Since these concepts so often appear together, it seems natural to assume they must bear some kind of relation to one another. But are they merely two core human interests, that happen to be vulnerable to the same kinds of threat? Or are they interrelated in a deeper way? What I aim to do in this chapter is draw on the philosophical literature on both concepts to consider how

they might be connected, and explore whether certain ways of connecting them are more fruitful than others.

This is not, however, a straightforward exercise. As the rest of this volume makes abundantly clear, there is no consensus on what autonomy is: competing conceptions of autonomy have emerged from the literature, each suited to its own theoretical purpose. This means the term 'autonomy' can mean very different things, depending on who is uttering it. The very same pattern holds for dignity. Since most invocations of autonomy and dignity – whether in public discourse or the academic literature – fail to distinguish which of the competing conceptions of either term is intended, we cannot take for granted that superficially plausible connections will bear scrutiny, once it is clarified which conceptions are at play.

Before we can unpack the relationship between dignity and autonomy, then, we need to identify the competing conceptions of autonomy and dignity in their respective literatures. Only then can we consider what relationship the two might stand in.

Competing Conceptions

The most useful place to start in getting a sense of the ambiguity of autonomy is with Joel Feinberg. According to Feinberg (1986), the term autonomy has four distinct meanings: it can be a capacity, a condition, a right, or an ideal. Only the first three will be of relevance here.

- As a capacity, autonomy refers to “the ability to make rational choices (p.28)”. To be autonomous, in this sense, means having the cognitive tools that would enable you to self-govern, irrespective of whether you actually do so.
- As a condition, autonomy refers to actually *being* self-governing. To be autonomous, in this sense, means being in control of yourself by appropriately exercising your relevant capacities, while being free of other autonomy-inhibiting impediments.
- As a right, autonomy refers to being sovereign over oneself. To be autonomous, in this sense, is to have the right to decide for yourself how to lead your life, in both day-to-day and long-term decisions.

To see how these three meanings come apart, we can consider them from the perspective of someone concerned about maintaining their autonomy into old age. This might involve any combination of: worry about losing certain core capacities through dementia; worry about failure to self-govern through weakness of will; or worry about being denied the right to make one’s own decisions regarding housing, finances, etc.

While distinct, these three meanings are nonetheless interrelated – and all ultimately circle back to autonomy as condition. Autonomy-as-right most immediately relates to autonomy-as-capacity, since it is the capacity for autonomy that grounds the right to autonomy. However, autonomy-as-right itself appeals to autonomy-as-condition, since the capacities in question are identified

through asking what is needed to actually *be* autonomous in one's day to day life. It is perhaps for this reason that virtually all recent theoretical work on autonomy has focused on autonomy-as-condition, and it is in determining the necessary conditions for achieving it that the central fault-lines in the literature have appeared.¹

If autonomy is a slippery concept, dignity is downright elusive. Denigrated by Schopenhauer as 'the shibboleth of all perplexed and empty-headed philosophers', dignity is frequently denounced as a useless moral concept, in virtue of the sheer variability and opacity of its meaning (Macklin, 2003; Pinker, 2008). In order to bring some order to the confusion, we can pull out two very distinct conceptions of dignity at play in the literature, which are of most relevance here: what I'll call dignity-as-inner-worth; and dignity-as-bearing (cf. Killmister, 2020: 6-13).

The first of these is arguably the most common within philosophical circles. To have dignity, on this understanding, is to have an inestimable inner worth, which grounds our standing to make moral claims. The figure most prominently associated with such a view was, of course, Immanuel Kant, especially his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1976). As Kant is typically read in that work, dignity refers to a worth above all price, which is held only insofar as the thing in question is not a means to a further end, but rather an end in itself. Dignity is then identified with autonomy: only the moral law has a worth above all price, and thus only human beings have dignity, insofar as we alone have the capacity to respect the moral law, which we do through the exercise of our moral autonomy.

¹ *[footnote linking to any chapters that cover the procedural/substantive/relational debate].*

Dignity-as-bearing, by contrast, focuses on what it means to *be dignified*, thus appealing to a variable quality of persons: some have it, and some manifestly do not (Kolnai, 1976; Hursthouse, 2007; Schroeder, 2008). For instance, someone like Nelson Mandela might be held up as a paragon of dignity, while a drunken frat boy might be criticized for behaving in an undignified way. On this conception, having dignity involves making choices about how to behave, refraining from certain activities or modes of presentation and elevating others. Importantly, though, dignity-as-bearing is not just vulnerable to our own misdeeds – it can also be threatened by the actions or omissions of others. We can lose our dignity-as-bearing, for instance, if others force us into humiliating situations.

Unlike autonomy, there is no core meaning of dignity upon which the others implicitly rely. Those who hold to a conception of dignity-as-bearing, for instance, often express deep skepticism about the idea of dignity-as-inner-worth (see, e.g., Barclay, 2018). This makes it even more pressing to determine precisely which conception of dignity is intended, when connections between dignity and autonomy are being claimed.

We have seen that autonomy and dignity are frequently invoked together, which strongly suggests they are closely related. However, we have also seen that both autonomy and dignity can be understood in very different ways. Which conception of autonomy is being connected to which conception of dignity will significantly affect the plausibility, and theoretical utility, of the proposed connection. What I will do in the remainder of this chapter, then, is map out three

different ways in which autonomy and dignity can be connected. For each connection, I will identify which conception of each term is being – or ought to be – invoked; and I will evaluate the resulting connection.

Mapping the Connections

The first, and most common, way in which autonomy and dignity are assumed to be connected is as a dependence relationship. More precisely, and drawing heavily on Kant, the claim here is that dignity is grounded in autonomy, in the sense that for any given individual, they have dignity if and only if they are autonomous.²

We can see this claim made most explicitly in James Griffin's work (2001, 2008). Griffin's methodology is to try to locate a common historical thread running through human rights theory and practice, from which a substantive account of human rights can be built. He finds that thread in the concept of dignity: throughout history, he argues, people have been said to have human (or natural) rights because they have dignity. Moreover, dignity in this context is taken to refer to agency. So we have human rights because we have dignity; and our dignity consists in us being a certain kind of agent – able to reflect on the kind of life we want to lead, and take means to pursue that life.

² A closely related claim holds that the dignity of an *individual* is grounded in the autonomy of the *species*, in the sense that every human being has dignity because autonomy is an essential part of human nature (see, e.g., (Tasioulas, 2014)). Space precludes engaging with that idea here – but see (Jaworska and Tannenbaum, 2013) for a good discussion of its problems.

A related claim can be seen in the theory of dignity developed by George Kateb (2011). While Kateb's discussion of dignity is far deeper and more wide-ranging than Griffin's, he shares some core commitments. In particular he shares the idea that an individual's dignity is contingent on her autonomy. As he puts it:

Degraded human beings therefore lose their identity as human beings and as particular persons, at least for a significant stretch of time. [...] Thus through no fault of their own, they no longer manifest the reasons for which incomparable dignity is ascribed to human beings. Except in rare cases, they can no longer exercise free agency or moral agency (p.20).

For Kateb, as for Griffin, we have dignity only insofar as we have/maintain our agency.

When dignity is taken to be grounded in autonomy, dignity-as-inner-worth is clearly the relevant conception. The challenge philosophers like Griffin and Kateb are seeking to address is identifying the 'special something' that gives human beings an elevated moral status. As is becoming increasingly common (Kymlicka, 2018), they apply the term 'dignity' to this special something, such that to have dignity is to have a certain kind of moral worth, and command a certain kind of respect.

Since this special something is meant to explain our high moral standing, autonomy-as-capacity is the only viable conception of autonomy to play the grounding role. Autonomy-as-right itself describes a status humans possess, rather than a grounds for that status, so cannot do the

relevant work. Autonomy-as-condition, by contrast, is coherent but too demanding: depending on which account of autonomy-as-condition we adopt, an agent would lose her autonomy, and hence her moral worth, any time she was weak-willed (Frankfurt, 1971), or alienated from her own desires (Christman, 2009), or had internalized oppressive norms (Stoljar, 2000), or even just because she was trapped in a dominating relationship (Oshana, 2006). However useful such conceptions of autonomy are in other contexts, they are clearly unsuited for this particular theoretical role.

This leaves autonomy-as-capacity. While the claim that dignity-as-inner-worth is grounded in autonomy-as-capacity has a robust philosophical pedigree, it is nonetheless important to be clear what accepting it would commit us to, and why this is problematic. The key problem is this: while it is not as demanding as autonomy-as-condition, using autonomy-as-capacity as the grounds for dignity-as-inner-worth would entail that a significant number of human beings – and in particular young children and people with significant cognitive impairments – do not have the same moral value as other humans, do not command the same respect as other humans, and do not have the same standing to make moral claims as other humans.

The scope of this exclusive implication becomes clear if we focus on the literature on autonomy, rather than the literature on dignity (though the latter is where this grounding connection is usually to be found). Within the autonomy literature, autonomy-as-capacity is most commonly invoked for the purpose of exploring autonomy-as-right, especially in the contexts of consent and paternalism. More precisely, autonomy-as-right is understood to be conditional on autonomy-as-

capacity. It is for this reason it is taken to be morally permissible to govern on behalf of small children and individuals with significant cognitive impairments: such individuals lack the capacities necessary to exercise the kind of self-governance that autonomy-as-right protects. However, the claim that individuals who lack autonomy-as-capacity thereby lack the right to self-govern is a far cry from the claim that individuals who lack autonomy-as-capacity lack equal moral worth.

A tentative diagnosis is possible here. Within the autonomy literature, it is relatively clear how autonomy-as-capacity relates to autonomy-as-right, and this shapes how that concept is developed. In particular, autonomy-as-capacity is taken to explain the wrong of paternalism, and it is taken to underpin the need for, and determine the conditions of, valid consent (Killmister, 2018: 119-135). Within these contexts, there are clear and well-theorized dangers of failing to recognize an individual's autonomy-as-capacity, and thus denying them autonomy-as-right. However, there are also significant dangers of *attributing* autonomy-as-capacity to an individual who in fact lacks it. An individual who is incapable of self-governing is placed at significant risk of harm if they are empowered to make high-stakes financial decisions, or are assumed to be capable of sexual consent. There are thus good reasons to conceptualize autonomy-as-capacity in relatively demanding, and highly cognitive, terms. We do not, however, have good reasons to conceptualize dignity-as-inner-worth in correspondingly demanding, and highly cognitive, terms. In fact, since dignity-as-inner-worth is supposed to explain the elevated and *equal* moral worth of all humans, we have good reasons *not* to conceptualize it in demanding, and highly cognitive,

terms. Yet that demandingness is imported into dignity-as-inner-worth insofar as it is presumed to be grounded in autonomy-as-capacity.

I have suggested it is not theoretically fruitful – and is in fact theoretically pernicious – to take dignity-as-inner-worth to be grounded in autonomy-as-capacity. The perniciousness lies in the implication that significant numbers of human beings lack dignity-as-inner-worth. This perniciousness could admittedly be avoided if we could identify capacities that were in fact universal, unlike the capacities that are typically taken to underpin autonomy-as-right. However, the broader and less stringent the selected capacities, the less claim they would have to be called *autonomy* – at least as that concept is typically understood within the autonomy literature. If the goal is to develop a universal basis for dignity-as-inner-worth, the grounding connection between dignity and autonomy needs to be abandoned.

The second connection that is sometimes drawn between autonomy and dignity takes it to involve a conflation. The idea here is that respecting dignity and respecting autonomy amount to the same thing. Ruth Macklin (2003) has most famously put this claim forward in the context of healthcare ethics, arguing that the frequent injunction to respect patients' dignity is unhelpful, because, insofar as it means anything at all, it reduces to respecting patients' autonomy.

At least as Macklin develops the idea, it is best understood in terms of dignity-as-inner-worth, since she is appealing to the 'special something' within human beings that commands respect. In terms of autonomy, insofar as she focuses on issues such as the right to informed consent, her

claim is most plausibly appealing to autonomy-as-right, rather than autonomy-as-capacity (though as we've seen earlier, autonomy-as-right must at some stage appeal to autonomy-as-capacity in determining who the bearers of autonomy-as-right would be). So Macklin's idea is essentially this: individuals with select cognitive capacities have autonomy-as-right, and this entitles them to certain kinds of treatment, especially around informed consent. When medical ethicists demand that patients be treated with dignity, all they mean is that patients are recognized as persons with authority over their own lives.

While it is certainly possible for such a conflation to be occurring, it is important to be clear about what is obscured if we adopt this interpretation. This can be brought out most forcefully by looking to the rapid responses that followed the publication of Macklin's article. One respondent (Bastian, 2003) writes: "As patients, we inevitably encounter behaviour and experiences that are humiliating, demeaning and frankly - well, undignified. Do we then say, 'Oh, I just feel that my autonomy was not respected'?"; another (Taylor, 2003) writes "I see dignity as a broader term, and one that requires of the medical provider a greater reach and sensitivity to the full embodiment of being human"; another (Baker, 2003) again, "Respect for [dignity] is a distinct component of what is meant by respect for persons, and it resonates strongly in the care of the dying, especially those who no longer retain any autonomy but should still be treated with respect. When we toilet and wash dying people rather than leaving them dirty, when we moisten their mouths rather than leaving them dry, when we lay them out carefully after death, it is their dignity that we are respecting."

There are three key points to be drawn from these responses. The first is that, at least in the context of medical care (though plausibly much more broadly), when we speak of respecting dignity we oftentimes mean something quite distinct from respecting someone's dignity-as-inner-worth. The demand to be treated with dignity is not – or not only – a demand to have one's equal moral worth recognized. It can be a demand not to be left naked on a hospital gurney, or toileted with a door open, or spoken about as if we weren't there (cf. Killmister, 2010). To put the point another way: the demand to have one's dignity respected commonly invokes the idea of dignity-as-bearing, rather than dignity-as-inner-worth. And as noted above, there is no reason to think that we need to appeal to the idea of dignity-as-inner-worth in order to make sense of, or fully articulate, the idea of dignity-as-bearing.

However, and this brings us to the second point, if we try to reconfigure the conflation claim in terms of dignity-as-bearing, it becomes far less plausible. Respecting someone's autonomy-as-right involves treating them as authorities over their own lives, recognizing their entitlement to make decisions about what they will do and what will be done to them. Upholding someone's dignity-as-bearing, however, is largely about avoiding shame and humiliation (Killmister, 2020, esp. Ch2 and Ch3). While it can be humiliating to be denied the authority to make one's own decisions, and hence there is *some* connection between autonomy-as-right and dignity-as-bearing, there are a plethora of additional ways in which people can be shamed or humiliated that bear little relationship to autonomy.

It may still be tempting to try to salvage the conflation claim, by bringing it back to autonomy-as-capacity and dignity-as-inner-worth. While this invokes the same two conceptions as the grounding connection explored in the previous section, it differs insofar as it focuses on the respect we are owed, rather than our moral status *per se*. The idea here, then, would be that the kind of respect we are entitled to *qua* beings with dignity is identical to the respect we are entitled to *qua* autonomous beings. This brings us to the third and final point. We saw in the last section that the scope of autonomy-as-capacity is much narrower than it would need to be to appropriately underpin dignity-as-inner worth, because significant numbers of humans cannot plausibly lay claim to autonomy-as-capacity. In the context of the conflation claim, this translates to the problem that many human beings would not command the relevant kind of respect. Insofar as respect simply amounts to recognizing the other as an autonomous being, and treating her accordingly, this may not seem to be a problem. After all, it is far from obvious that we ought to respect people as other than what they actually are. It becomes a problem, though, if 'autonomous being' is presumed to be *all* that we are, morally speaking, such that respect for our autonomous natures exhausts the forms of respect that we command.

This critique echoes the point made above about the gap between respecting autonomy-as-right and according someone dignity-as-bearing. Just as there are ways to violate someone's dignity that do not involve denying their autonomy-as-right, there are ways that we can respect someone that do not amount to recognizing their autonomy-as-capacity. To put the point another way: treating respect for dignity-as-inner-worth as synonymous with respect for autonomy-as-capacity deprives us of all the different bases of respect we might have, and all the different forms of

respect that would follow. For instance, we can be respected for our creativity, for our humor, for our tenacity in the face of adversity, for the life that we have led to this point, and so on. Each of these qualities calls for a different kind of response – a different form of respect – than does autonomy-as-capacity. To reiterate one of the key points from the rapid responses cited above, “When we toilet and wash dying people rather than leaving them dirty, when we moisten their mouths rather than leaving them dry [...] it is their dignity that we are respecting (Baker, 2003)” Recognizing diverse bases of dignity, and hence of respect, is especially important in the context of healthcare ethics, insofar as hospitals and care homes are sites in which the diminishment of capacities for autonomy is an ever-present threat.

The final connection to explore posits a different kind of relationship between autonomy and dignity. Rather than ground one in the other, or take respect for them to be co-extensive, I will argue that they are causally related. More precisely, I will argue that the denial of one will tend to undercut the achievement of the other. Importantly, this relation runs in both directions: when an agent’s autonomy is thwarted it can undermine her dignity, and violations of dignity can impede an agent’s autonomy.

A key feature to note about the causal claim is that, unlike the conflation claim, it allows for differentiation between the two concepts. Indeed, the two *must* be distinct, if one is to help bring about the other. This already makes the causal claim more theoretically fruitful than the conflation claim. Moreover, the causal claim is also more theoretically fruitful than the grounding

claim: it not only lacks the latter's pernicious implications, but also helps enrich our understanding of both autonomy and dignity.

To see how thwarting autonomy might undermine an agent's dignity, we need to take a closer look at dignity-as-bearing. This conception of dignity has not received as much attention in the literature as the other two, most likely because its normative import is less obviously apparent. Nonetheless, as I have argued elsewhere (Killmister, 2020), dignity-as-bearing is highly significant because of its tight connection to shame and humiliation. This is most readily observed in situations where dignity-as-bearing is taken away from people, and they are unable to uphold basic standards of comportment, whether because they are forced to transgress them or denied the means to enable them to be upheld. Torture, homelessness, sub-standard hospital care: all of these are sites in which people decry their loss of dignity. At least some of the time, what they are gesturing towards are the standards they have had to contravene – the public exposures of their flesh; their inability to control basic bodily functions, or perform them in private – and the shame and humiliation that accompanies such transgressions.

If we understand dignity-as-bearing in terms of upholding core standards of comportment, its dependence on autonomy-as-condition becomes clear. To uphold standards requires self-control, which is precisely the phenomenon intended to be captured by accounts of autonomy-as-condition.

Identifying this causal connection between autonomy and dignity has the potential to advance work on both concepts. It can advance work on dignity, because we can draw on existing accounts of autonomy-as-condition (which have been evolving now for 50 years, with ever-increasing sophistication) to better understand how to enable people to maintain their dignity – a highly important task, given the connection between loss of dignity-as-bearing and the corrosive emotion of shame. Less obviously, though, attending to this causal connection can also advance work on autonomy, because homing in on the absence of self-control most evident in loss of dignity-as-bearing helps illuminate two important, and interrelated, lacunae in the autonomy literature.

Firstly, it helps draw attention to the tendency within discussion of autonomy-as-condition to focus on the motivational structures of the agent, at the expense of considering the gap between intention and action.³ In other words, theorists have looked primarily at whether the agent's *desires* or *intentions* are autonomous, and so have not paid sufficient attention to the ways autonomy-as-condition can be undermined after the intention has been formed. For instance, a hospital patient may well form both the desire and the intention to cover her buttocks from public view; but if she is given a hospital gown that is open in the back she will have no way of doing so. The failure of dignity-as-bearing in such cases is directly traceable to the inability of the agent to control how she presents to the world – it reflects an inability to effectively self-govern, and hence a lack of autonomy-as-condition.

³ One exception to this tendency is the literature on 'deviant causal chains' (see, e.g., Peacocke, 1979). However, this literature tends to concern itself with ever-more baroque thought experiments, rather than the more mundane threats to converting intention to action that we all face.

While it may well have just been taken for granted within the autonomy literature that external intervention in the gap between intention and action undermines autonomy-as-condition, the lack of sustained attention to that space has left autonomy theories less well-equipped to help identify threats to dignity-as-achievement than they might have been.⁴ This is because the threats to autonomy-as-condition are not exhausted by the obvious cases of an external actor meddling in the execution of an action. As the hospital-gown example shows, intentions can be thwarted by omission just as easily as by interference. Starting from dignity-as-bearing, and considering how autonomy-as-condition is a necessary precondition for it, thus helps draw attention to the need for theories of autonomy to more carefully attend to the social support structures we need in place to transform intentions into autonomous action, especially when we're at our most vulnerable.

This brings us to the second, related, lacuna in the autonomy literature. While accounts of autonomy-as-condition have become increasingly relational over the past 20 years (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000; Oshana, 2014), they have tended to overlook a specific form of relationality relevant to understanding this connection between autonomy and dignity. Many accounts of autonomy tend now to recognize the need for supportive relationships to build and maintain the capacities necessary for autonomy-as-condition (see, e.g., Christman, 2009). Insofar as these

⁴ An important exception to this claim is (Bierria, 2014). Bierria argues that the successful performance of an action often depends on 'uptake' from interlocutors, analogously to how speech acts require uptake. This makes our actions vulnerable to misinterpretation from others, a problem exacerbated by structural oppression. While Bierria herself does not draw a connection to dignity, there is a tight connection here: if our ability to perform certain actions is contingent on its interpretation by others, our ability to maintain dignity-as-bearing is correspondingly vulnerable.

capacities involve things like strength of will, they will also serve as important preconditions for dignity-as-bearing. Such capacity-sustaining relationships are not, however, all that is needed. Some accounts of autonomy do go further, and make certain kinds of relationships – or their absence – constitutive of autonomy. If we accept that being in a dominating relationship is incompatible with being autonomous, as Marina Oshana (2006) argues, the lacuna is partially filled. An agent whose ability to act is contingent on the will of another will have only a very fragile grasp on dignity-as-bearing: however strong her resolve, she may simply be blocked from upholding the standards she strives for. Focusing just on absence of domination, however, still obscures the extent to which autonomy-as-condition also depends upon the positive assistance of others in helping us fulfil our own intentions. Closer examination of the forms such assistance can, and should, take would make a fruitful contribution to the autonomy literature.

I have argued that autonomy-as-condition is causally connected to dignity-as-bearing. This connection is important to recognize, because it means we can draw on theoretical work on autonomy-as-condition to better protect against loss or violation of dignity-as-bearing. Conversely, though, we can also use this connection to improve theories of autonomy-as-condition. Especially because the loss or violation of dignity-as-bearing is felt very acutely, and is thus relatively easy to identify, such cases can provide a useful heuristic for identifying the various ways in which autonomy-as-condition can be thwarted, especially through the absence of supportive relationships and social structures.

While I have focused here on the claim that autonomy-as-condition is an important precondition for dignity-as-bearing, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the converse is also true: loss or violation of dignity-as-bearing can be highly corrosive of an agent's autonomy-as-condition, and in extreme cases even of her autonomy-as-capacity. This is because of the tight connection between dignity-as-bearing and self-respect (cf. Meyers, 1995).

To better understand the connection between dignity-as-bearing and self-respect, we need to take a closer look at how dignity-as-bearing is achieved. Importantly, not all standards are relevant to the achievement of dignity. I am no less dignified if I run a red light on a quiet street; but I am less dignified if I go out in public with my skirt inadvertently tucked into my tights. As this example demonstrates, whether or not a standard is relevant to dignity does not depend on its moral import or the likely effects of its transgression. Rather, whether a standard is relevant to dignity depends on whether the transgression of that standard would be a source of shame or social stigma.⁵ As such, when we are compelled – either through coercion or circumstances – to transgress a dignitarian standard, it can have a profound effect on our self-respect. We have done something that either directly invokes shame, or that leaves us open to public humiliation. Damaged self-respect, in turn, threatens our autonomy. As John Rawls (1999: 386) points out, without self-respect “nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them. All desire becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism”. In order to have the motivation and energy to convert desires to intentions, and then

⁵ As I argue in (Killmister, 2020), dignitarian standards can either be self-imposed, or they can be imposed on us by a community of which we're a member.

intentions to actions, we need to consider ourselves worth the effort. Sustained and/or egregious violations of dignity-as-bearing erode that sense of self-worth.

I have argued that the causal connection between autonomy and dignity runs in both directions. Because of this mutual interdependence, we are susceptible to vicious cycles: undercutting a person's autonomy-as-condition can undermine her dignity-as-bearing, which can then make it much harder for her to achieve autonomy-as-condition, which in turn makes it more difficult to maintain her dignity-as-bearing, and so on. Conversely, though, the mutual interdependence of autonomy and dignity enables *virtuous* cycles. If we can assist another to achieve autonomy-as-condition, and thereby secure dignity-as-bearing, this can facilitate her autonomy-as-condition going forward.

Conclusion

Autonomy and dignity remain slippery concepts. If we are careful to articulate which conception of each we are concerned with, though, we can avoid positing implausible or problematic connections between them, and find fruitful ones.

I have argued in this chapter that the most fruitful connection is to be found in a causal interdependency between autonomy-as-condition and dignity-as-bearing. This connection is fruitful both practically, insofar as attending to it can help us identify and avoid vicious cycles that

are destructive of both autonomy and dignity, and theoretically, insofar as attending to it can help us improve theories of both concepts.

I have also argued in this chapter that we ought to avoid either positing a grounding relationship between autonomy and dignity, or assuming the terms are synonymous. Both moves run the risk of excluding vulnerable individuals from our moral consideration, and problematically narrow the bases on which to value or respect one another. In both cases, I suggest, the problem lies in asking autonomy to do too much moral work. While autonomy is a powerful and significant feature of human life, it does not exhaust what matters. Dignity, for all its opacity, can help point us towards that something more.

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