

Dignity at the Limit:
Jean-Luc Nancy on the Possibility of Incommensurable Worth

Since Immanuel Kant assigned the concept a central role in his moral philosophy, dignity has become, according to Arthur Schopenhauer, “the shibboleth of all the perplexed and empty-headed moralists who concealed behind that imposing expression their lack of any real basis of morals, or, at any rate, of one that had any meaning.”¹ Schopenhauer has not been alone in his skepticism, and indeed his contempt, for the idea of dignity. Ruth Macklin, a medical ethicist, has recently argued that the concept is useless. Appeals to dignity, she suggests, “are either vague restatements of other, more precise, notions or mere slogans that add nothing to an understanding of the topic.”² And Steven Pinker, in an article titled “The Stupidity of Dignity,” has characterized it as “a squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it.”³

For better or worse, though, this purportedly vacuous, merely subjective notion has over the last sixty years come to play a foundational role in legal, political, and ethical thought, both at the national and international levels. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, begins with the claim that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Article 1 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany states the foundational role of dignity even more strongly: “Human dignity is inviolable. To respect it and protect it is the duty of all state power.” In addition, dignity features prominently in the texts of the Geneva Conventions and in numerous other international human rights covenants.⁴ Courts of law make use of the

¹ Schopenhauer (1965, p. 100).

² Macklin (2003, p. 1419).

³ Pinker (2008)

⁴ McCrudden (2008, pp. 667-671).

concept in deciding cases concerning issues ranging from prohibitions on dwarf tossing to the policy of shooting down airplanes that have been hijacked by terrorists. And bioethicists frequently invoke dignity in their arguments concerning cloning, genetic engineering, and end-of-life medical decision making. As this small and very much incomplete list of examples illustrates, the stakes of the debates around dignity are very high; it is important that we get it right.

In this paper, I argue that the skeptics about dignity are mistaken. Dignity is far from a useless or vacuous concept, and it is certainly more than a loftier sounding formulation for other, better defined moral values. Any argument in defense of dignity, though, must begin by acknowledging the truth in one of the skeptics' core intuitions: Dignity is without a doubt a strange sort of value, and it is not at all easy to pin down what it means or what is supposed to follow from it. In what follows, I will focus specifically on describing the conception of dignity that has its origin in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, since it is that conception, more than any other, that has been taken up in contemporary legal, political, and ethical thought, and that has been criticized for being conceptually incoherent.⁵ Following that, I will examine an anti-Kantian argument advanced by Arthur Schopenhauer in his *On the Basis of Morality*. I take this to be one of the strongest and most straightforward arguments against the

⁵ We must be careful to distinguish the Kantian conception of dignity from the explicitly social and political conception of *dignitas* that dates from the time of the Roman Republic. Traces of the latter no doubt persist in Kant's conception, but nonetheless the two are importantly different. Briefly, *dignitas* referred to social rank, often as manifested in the holding of political office. Those who had *dignitas* in this sense were entitled to certain forms of respect, which were codified in the law. They were also expected to comport themselves in a manner that would render them worthy of the respect they were owed. This gives rise to an extended sense of dignity as connoting a noble, upright bearing. The social and political conception of *dignitas* is different from the Kantian conception in two very important ways. First, it is an explicitly hierarchical conception; it does not ground a duty of respect for persons as such. And second, a person can forfeit his or her *dignitas* by behaving in ways that fail to live up to the standard that it imposes on its possessors. Thus, if we do not take care to distinguish these two conceptions, we will be unable to avoid the conclusion that dignity really is a confused concept.

possibility of dignity, conceived in the Kantian manner as an absolute and incommensurable worth. Next, I will briefly consider some common interpretations of dignity, showing how they fail adequately to address Schopenhauer's concern. Finally, drawing heavily on the ontology articulated by Jean-Luc Nancy in a number of different works, but especially in *Being Singular Plural*, I will suggest an account of dignity that makes sense of its absoluteness and incommensurability.

I. The Kantian Conception of Dignity

Four characteristics of the Kantian conception of dignity are especially important for debates about the practical value of the concept. The first of these characteristics that I would like to address is dignity's status as an absolute and incomparable value. Dignity, for Kant, is understood on the basis of its distinction from price, which is a relative, and thus comparable, value. If a thing has a price, then, it "can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*."⁶ If I deal with two things in terms of their prices—say two new pens of the same model—then it makes no practical difference which of the two I choose to write with. I do not treat each pen as having a unique value; one is quite literally as good as another. Or if one pen is not just as good as another, then the difference in their value can be measured on the same scale. One of the pens might be less prone to blotting than the other, for example, enabling it to perform the primary function of a pen more adequately. Things with price, in sum, are commensurable. The value of a being with dignity is qualitatively different from the values of things like pens in that it is absolute and thus incommensurable, "raised above all price."⁷ I do not encounter a being with dignity

⁶ Kant (1996a, p. 84 [4:434]).

⁷ Kant (1996a, p. 84 [4:434]).

merely as an instance of a general kind of value; the value of each being with dignity is unique and irreplaceable.

Second, this absolute and incomparable worth gives rise to an unconditional obligation to respect it. Kant states this point most explicitly in the *Doctrine of Virtue*: A person, i.e., a moral subject, “possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world.”⁸ This duty of respect is expressed in the Formula of Humanity from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: “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.”⁹ Properties like “orange” or “three-sided,” or even like “strong,” “friendly,” or “good at basketball” do not give rise to similar obligations of respect. In encountering those properties, I do not experience myself as necessitated to yield, refraining from exalting myself over the objects that have them.¹⁰ The orangeness of a book, for example, does not impose any constraint on my right to use the book however I please as a means to my ends. But to recognize a person as having dignity just is to experience such a constraint; while she may be valuable to me as a means in various respects, she is also present to me as an end in herself, as someone in relation to whom I must limit my self-esteem.

A third characteristic that is definitive of the Kantian conception of dignity is that it is innate and inalienable.¹¹ We do not need to do anything to earn it and we cannot do anything that would result in our forfeiting it. Kant expresses this point most straightforwardly in Section 39 the *Doctrine of Virtue*, where he argues that we must

⁸ Kant (1996c, p. 557 [6:435]).

⁹ Kant (1996a, p. 80 [4: 429]). Italics omitted.

¹⁰ Kant (1996c, p. 569 [6: 449]).

¹¹ Kant (1996c, pp. 545; 558 [6:420; 6:436]).

never treat others with contempt. What is most remarkable in this passage is Kant's insistence that we must respect the dignity of others even when they have acted in ways that render them unworthy of it.¹² Kant's example pertains to the punishment of criminals: Even though we are certainly entitled to deprive criminals of certain goods as punishment for their crimes, we must not go so far as to impose "disgraceful punishments that dishonor humanity itself (such as quartering a man, having him torn by dogs, cutting off his nose and ears)."¹³ No matter how badly he has acted, the criminal retains a dignity that imposes limits on others in their dealings with him. He can do nothing that would reduce him to the status of a moral non-entity, undeserving of the basic respect we owe to human beings in general.

This point about the inalienability of dignity sheds some more light on the distinction between price and dignity. Although treating others with contempt is always contrary to duty, Kant argues that, in some cases at least, we cannot help "looking down on some in comparison with others."¹⁴ To look down on some in comparison with others is to evaluate them in terms of their price, or relative value. If I discover in a person the habit of pursuing his own interest by all means available to him, including by lying and theft, then I will form a sharply critical judgment of him. If I were looking to hire someone to repair my car, I would certainly put him near the bottom of my list, preferring mechanics who are not liars and thieves. In judging him with reference to his price—his value relative to my desire to have my car repaired well and at a reasonable cost—I do him no wrong. All of us have relative value, and we cannot help treating each other accordingly. The point about the inalienability of dignity, though, is that we must never

¹² Kant (1996c, p. 580 [6:463]).

¹³ Kant (1996c, p. 580 [6:463]).

¹⁴ Kant (1996c, pp. 579-580 [6:463]). Italics omitted.

treat others as if their whole value were relative. Even those whose price is zero, or less than zero, have dignity; we must always treat them, in John Rawls's well-known formulation, as "self-originating sources of valid claims."¹⁵

The fourth and final characteristic of Kantian dignity that I would like to address seems to be completely at odds with its supposed innateness and inalienability. In many passages throughout his ethical works, Kant suggests that we have only a tenuous hold on our dignity and that we must take great care not to let ourselves be deprived of it. A person who lies, for example, "throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being."¹⁶ We can also disavow our own dignity by lowering ourselves in relation to others, for example by being a lackey, a flatterer, or a beggar, by accepting favors we can do without, and by prostrating ourselves.¹⁷ By doing these sorts of things, Kant suggests, we make ourselves contemptible: A person "who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him."¹⁸ Insofar as we disavow our own dignity, in other words, it seems as if we reduce ourselves to the level of non-human animals, or even mere things, forfeiting our moral claim to be treated by others in accordance with the Formula of Humanity.

The conception of dignity outlined here gives rise to some very difficult theoretical problems. The first set of problems pertains to the characterization of dignity as absolute and incommensurable value. What can it mean to describe a value this way? Does it make any sense at all to speak of a value that cannot be thought as greater or lesser than other values? That is to say, does it make sense to think of value without any

¹⁵ Rawls (1980, p. 543).

¹⁶ Kant (1996c, pp. 552-553 [6:429]).

¹⁷ Kant (1996c, p. 558 [6:436]).

¹⁸ Kant (1996c, p. 559 [6:437]).

reference to a common measure? And closely related to these questions, does it really make sense to speak of a value that would not be a value relative to some end or relative to someone who had an interest in that value? The second major difficulty is to explain how dignity gives rise to obligations in a way that properties like “orange” and “three-sided” do not. How can it happen that the mere recognition of a property unconditionally necessitates the will of a rational being to respect it? And finally, how can dignity be both inalienable—the kind of thing we need not earn and that we cannot even in principle forfeit—and also something so tenuous, requiring great care lest people be deprived of it? Steven Pinker raised exactly this kind of concern in “The Stupidity of Dignity:” In the report of the President’s Council on Bioethics, titled *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, we “read that dignity reflects excellence, striving, and conscience, so that only some people achieve it by dint of effort and character. We also read that everyone, no matter how lazy, evil, or mentally impaired, has dignity in full measure.”¹⁹ How can both of these claims be true? A successful defense of dignity must be able to provide answers to each of these questions. Before providing such a defense, though, I would like to examine in more detail some of the most powerful arguments against the practical value of dignity.

II. Incommensurable Value as *Contradictio in Adjecto*: Schopenhauer’s Critique

According to Arthur Schopenhauer, to describe dignity as an absolute value is like describing a man as an uncle-in-himself: it is a *contradictio in adjecto*.²⁰ Value, in other words, can make sense only as a relative concept. Suppose, for example, that I own a car

¹⁹ Pinker (2008). I believe Pinker is responding here to a real confusion in the bioethics literature, where Kantian conceptions of dignity can often be found mixed together with the ancient Roman conception. The latter, with its emphasis on noble bearing, is especially evident in the work of Leon R. Kass, who served as chairman of the President’s Council on Bioethics, and who famously decried the indignity of licking ice cream cones, which he characterized as a “catlike activity that has been made acceptable in informal America but that still offends those who know why eating in public is offensive.” Kass (1999, p. 148), quoted in Pinker (2008).

²⁰ Schopenhauer (1965, p. 95).

dealership and I want to evaluate the value of one of my salespersons. There are only two ways I can do that. First, I can evaluate her in comparison with the other salespersons I employ or could employ. And second, I can think of her value to me: My goal is to make as much money as I can selling cars, and she contributes in some way, well or badly, to that end. “Outside of these two relations,” Schopenhauer writes, “the concept *worth* loses all meaning; this is so clear that there is no need for further discussion.”²¹

I believe Schopenhauer’s contention agrees well with at least some of our intuitions about the nature of value. If I describe someone as having a particular value, my interlocutor, it seems, would always be justified in asking the follow up question, “in respect of what?” The answer I give to that question will always refer, it seems, to some kind of measure relative to which different values can be compared. If I say a person has a high value as a shortstop, for example, then I am committed to claims about his value relative to other shortstops and relative to the project of winning baseball games. If, on the other hand, I answer the question, “in respect of what?” by saying “in respect of nothing in particular,” then my interlocutor would most likely believe either that I had misunderstood the question or that I was being willfully evasive. If this is right, then the attribution of dignity as absolute value must either be understood as a rhetorical flourish, a kind of “hollow hyperbole,” or else as the product of a muddled thinking that has failed to conceive clearly the measure of value it had been employing.²²

If Schopenhauer’s argument about the conceptual incoherence of incommensurable value is correct, then the other characteristics of Kantian dignity are in trouble as well. First, if all value is necessarily relative, then it cannot be innate and

²¹ Schopenhauer (1965, p. 95).

²² Schopenhauer (1965, p. 100).

inalienable. To return to a previous example, if an employee of mine has high value as a salesperson, that means that she compares well to other salespersons, both actual and potential, and that she successfully promotes my end of making money. In this case, the salesperson has obviously had to earn the value she has: I only employ her and judge her favorably on the basis of her demonstrated abilities. Moreover, she can lose her value in a couple of different ways. First, her skills might deteriorate enough to affect her ability to sell cars. If her skills deteriorate to the point where she cannot sell at all, then her value as a salesperson would drop to zero. (I might even regard her value as less than zero, since I would be paying her and receiving no benefit in return.) But secondly, even if her skills do not deteriorate, she can lose her value if I hire some new salespersons who sell more than she does. If all value is relative, as Schopenhauer's argument suggests, then her value as a person would have to be understood in just the same way as her value as a salesperson. And if this is the case, then it is difficult to see how her value could give rise to an unconditional obligation of respect. If the value of persons is relative value, just like the value of things, then it seems that any imperatives governing my conduct with regard to them would be merely hypothetical. As a rational being, for example, I would be necessitated to take good care of a top of the line accordion that had come into my possession only on condition that the accordion was valuable to me, perhaps because of my appreciation for well made accordions or because I foresee the possibility of selling it at a profit. Likewise, I would be necessitated to treat another person with respect only on condition that she have a value of the kind that I happen to find important.

Is there any way, in light of these Schopenhauerian objections, to make conceptual sense of dignity as an absolute, incommensurable value? One possible

response to Schopenhauer's challenge would be to bite the bullet, acknowledging that we cannot provide a coherent justification for our commitment to the phenomenon. This acknowledgement would not have to entail Macklin's conclusion that dignity is a morally useless concept. We might, rather, want to borrow a strategy that Kant himself employed in arguing for the genuine bindingness of the moral law in general. In the first two sections of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant develops a determination of the moral law on the basis of our pre-philosophical, everyday moral cognition. He argues that there are certain concepts, such as good will, moral worth, and duty, that are simply part of our moral common sense. To determine the formula of the moral law, all we need to do is unpack the meaning of those concepts. But throughout these sections, Kant keeps open the possibility that our moral common sense is fundamentally mistaken, that our concepts of duty and moral worth are "empty delusion[s]" and "chimerical idea[s] without any truth."²³ It may be the case, in other words, that we have the subjective experience of ourselves as unconditionally obligated, but that the experience lacks objective validity. In the third section of the *Groundwork*, then, Kant provides a deduction that is designed to show that the moral law really is objectively valid. Unfortunately, the argument fails. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, then, Kant advances an entirely new argument for the objective validity of the moral law. There he insists that "the moral law cannot be proved by any deduction."²⁴ The validity of the law, rather, is given a priori as "the sole fact of pure reason."²⁵ This fact is absolutely basic, as we "cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason."²⁶ Perhaps dignity as absolute,

²³ Kant (1996a., pp. 57; 93 [4:402; 4:445]).

²⁴ Kant (1996b, p. 178 [5:47]).

²⁵ Kant (1996b, p. 165 [5:31]).

²⁶ Kant (1996b, p. 164 [5:31]).

inner worth is just a fact in this sense, admitting of no further explanation. Teresa Iglesias, in her paper “Bedrock Truths and the Dignity of the Individual,” makes an argument of this kind. That persons have an inner, inalienable worth is a bedrock truth, the kind of truth that grounds moral experience in general and is thus unprovable in terms of anything more basic.²⁷ On this account, our inability to explain dignity’s possibility is not a failure, but rather a reflection of the concept’s foundational status. It is just a fact that “each individual is recognized as the ultimate and most precious moral good” and that his or her dignity cannot “be taken away, or forfeited, whatever the person may do or however he or she may be regarded.”²⁸ It may indeed be the case that dignity is just a bedrock, unjustifiable moral truth, but this seems like a position we should only want to accept as a last resort. If dignity feels subjectively like a phenomenon that makes important moral demands on us, but nonetheless resists our attempts make conceptual sense of it, then we would be more justified in accepting Macklin’s conclusion that dignity is a vaguely conceived version of some other, more precisely worked out moral notion.

A second way of responding to Schopenhauer’s concerns about the coherence of dignity is to think of it as what Michael Rosen has called an “inner, transcendental kernel.”²⁹ This conception has a very long history in western thought about dignity, going back at least to Pope Leo I. In his sermon from December 25, 451, Leo says “Wake up then, o friend, and acknowledge the dignity of your nature. Recall that you have been

²⁷ Iglesias (2001, pp. 114-116).

²⁸ Iglesias (2001, pp. 131-132).

²⁹ Rosen (2012, p. 9).

made ‘according to the image of God.’”³⁰ This idea of human dignity as grounded in the *imago dei* was developed by later Christian thinkers, including most prominently Pope Innocent III, Roger de Caen, and Bernard of Cluny, in a strongly dualistic direction. These thinkers understood human dignity as pertaining exclusively to the soul, which they conceived in sharp distinction from the body. The body was understood as base, as the locus of concupiscence, while the soul was understood as the locus of a higher, qualitatively different kind of value.³¹ Because we are embodied beings, we are tempted to place great value in the world, in “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”³² But as beings created in the image of God, we are in possession of a value incomparably higher than these ephemeral and ignoble values; we debase our own dignity even to concern ourselves with them. But if we are tempted to focus our attention on worldly goods, despite the inappropriateness of our doing so, this is because our own value as images of God is utterly incommensurable with the worldly goods that make such strong impressions on our senses. Unlike the “superficial” and easily recognizable values of the world, our own dignity is deeply concealed in a kind of ontological interior. By thinking of dignity in this way as “inner,” this tradition of thought seems to place it outside the reach of an instrumental reason that would measure value solely with reference to worldly ends. As opposed to what is superficial, “inner” connotes something more profound and more genuine, but also something mysterious and perhaps even sacred. At any rate, it suggests that the worth in question is qualitatively different from other kinds. In addition, by thinking of dignity as inner in this way, the *imago dei*

³⁰ Saint Leo the Great (1996, p. 114). Leo’s reference here is to Genesis 1:26: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.’”

³¹ Bultot (1961, p. 450).

³² 1 John 2:16.

tradition conceives it as utterly proper to the one who has it. This conception thus supports the Kantian idea that one need not earn dignity and that one cannot do anything to forfeit it.

Does this conception of dignity as inner, transcendental kernel provide an adequate response to Schopenhauer's worry? Schopenhauer's argument has as its foundation a claim about how worth becomes manifest in our experience. Just as three-dimensional objects can only be co-given along with their internal and external horizons, so worth can only be co-given along with its context of comparison. From this it follows that no worth is absolute and incommensurable. Does the characterization of dignity as a kind of deeply concealed, divinely grounded inner worth help to shed light on how an absolute, incommensurable worth could be given in our experience? I do not believe so. Treating our dignity as grounded in our status as images of God seems rather to explain the obscure by the equally obscure. In characterizing our dignity as transcendent and mysterious, we attempt to place it outside the reach of instrumental reason. But it remains just as unclear how such a non-relative, non-instrumental value could actually be given in our experience. Our understanding of the phenomenon, then, remains exactly what it was.

III. Sense and Signification: Jean-Luc Nancy

In this section, I would like to suggest the outlines of a new account of dignity, focusing on how something like incommensurable worth could be given in our experience. The account I suggest will preserve, while nonetheless modifying, the most important characteristics of the Kantian conception of dignity. I will attempt to show that dignity really is an incommensurable value and that it does give rise to unconditional obligations. I will also attempt to show how dignity can be given as utterly proper, more

our own than anything else, but at the same time as something we are vulnerable to being deprived of. There is one important characteristic of dignity as it has been conceived both in the Kantian and *imago dei* traditions that my account will deny, however: I will argue that in order successfully to account for how dignity could be given in our experience, we must stop thinking of it as an “inner worth.” Drawing on the ontology that Jean-Luc Nancy articulates in many different works, but most explicitly in *Being Singular Plural*, I want to argue that dignity should not be conceived as a kind of property somehow present deep inside a person, but rather as an upsurge, each time unique, of non-significant sense that happens right at the limits where finite, singular beings become present to each other.

To show that this is the case, it will be helpful to begin at the beginning, with an account of the mode of givenness of being itself. Nancy articulates this beginning point especially clearly and straightforwardly in his *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*: “The given *always gives itself as something other than simply given.*”³³ There is, in other words, no brute givenness of being. The given never gives itself as what Hegel in his *Science of Logic* calls “the indeterminate *immediate.*”³⁴ Rather, whenever being is given, it is given *as*. The paper on which I write these words, for example, is given as white. There are not two discrete experiences here: the experience of brute, unqualified givenness and the experience of whiteness. The given is given right from the outset as white. And likewise, I am present to myself as someone with a particular life history, as someone who occupies various social roles and who is committed to different projects. And more generally, being itself is given *as* being. To conceive of the given as something

³³ Nancy (2002, p. 52).

³⁴ Hegel (1969, p. 81).

separate from its “as” is to conceive of an abstraction. Such a pure given has no place whatever in our experience.

To say that being is necessarily given *as* is also to say that being is inseparable from its sense or meaning. And what follows from this insight is that our experience in the world is always already meaningful; we are always already *in* meaning. Claude Lévi-Strauss expressed this insight well when he wrote that “the universe signified long before we began to know *what* it was signifying.”³⁵ As soon as the world is given, it gives itself as meaningful, even before we know exactly what its meaning is. In fact it is only because the world gives itself as vaguely meaningful that we strive to determine that meaning more precisely. Nancy expresses this same point when he writes that “there is no *epokhe* of sense, no ‘suspension’ of a ‘naïve thesis’ of sense, no ‘placing in parentheses’.”³⁶ We cannot treat meaning as if it were a dubious hypothesis about which we must suspend our judgment. That we are in meaning cannot even in principle be doubted, as the very act of doubting is itself a meaningful response to a meaningful problem.

This basic ontological claim points directly to a further question: How is sense given? According to Nancy, sense is given only as shared. It is important that we not misunderstand the meaning of “shared” here. Nancy does not mean to suggest that sense is given most originally as a common stock of significations, shared by all the members of a particular community, or perhaps by human beings in general. It must not, in other words, be conceived as any kind of milieu.³⁷ Sense, rather,

³⁵ Lévi-Strauss (1987, p. 61).

³⁶ Nancy (1997, p. 18).

³⁷ Nancy (1997, p. 5).

begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [*se disjoint*] in order to be itself *as* such. This “as” presupposes the distancing, spacing, and division of presence.... Pure unshared presence—presence to nothing, of nothing, for nothing—is neither present nor absent. It is the simple implosion of a being that could never have *been*—an implosion without any trace.³⁸

Pure, undivided presence, in sum, would be completely impenetrable to sense, a kind of black hole of meaning. If the given is meaningful, as it necessarily is, then it can only be given as exposed to an outside, divided from itself. How, precisely, ought we to understand the exposition of the given, its gesturing beyond itself toward its sense? One way is to conceive this exposition on the model of a circle. This model is expressed well in a passage from Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* that Nancy often quotes: “‘Sense’ is this wonderful word that is used in two opposite meanings. On the one hand it means the organ of immediate apprehension, but on the other hand we mean by it the sense, the meaning, the thought, the universal underlying the thing.”³⁹ Hegel is speaking here of the German word *Sinn*, which names both the sensible intuition of the given and the universal, the intelligible meaning of the given. *Sinn* thus names the givenness of the sensible and its intelligible meaning as a single, unified phenomenon. The English term “sense” functions in the same way, of course: We speak of the five senses as well as of the sense of a proposition. It is this unified phenomenon of sense that is represented in the form of a circle: “Ideality is ideality *of* sensibility, and sensibility is sensibility *of* ideality.”⁴⁰ It is this circular structure of sense that Nancy means to deny. Sense is not contained within the circular relation of the sensible and the intelligible; in our meaningful being-in-the-world, we always find an “excess of sense over all appropriable

³⁸ Nancy (1997, p. 2).

³⁹ Hegel (1975, pp. 128-129).

⁴⁰ Nancy (2002, p. 49).

sense.” So, for example, it may be the case that I am a philosopher, a professor, a friend, a baseball fan, etc., but it is also necessarily the case that I am something more than these significations. And that “something more” cannot be understood as yet another signification.

According to Nancy, then, sense happens in the event of a being’s exposure to an outside that it cannot appropriate. It is necessarily given as the being-with of beings. And “it is not the case that the ‘with’ is an addition to some prior Being; instead, the ‘with’ is at the heart of Being.”⁴¹ Beings are what they are only as “with,” as exposed to each other in the space of divided presence. It is this exposure that Nancy is referring to when he asserts that sense is given only as shared. Being cannot appropriate its sense—it cannot *have* a sense—precisely because “*all* sense resides in the nonappropriation of ‘being.’”⁴² In this non-appropriation, we encounter a third sense of sense beyond the two whose correlation Hegel found expressed in that wonderful word “sense.” In *The Sense of the World* Nancy notes that “although the etymology of the word *sense* is not clear, one constant is that the word is attached to a semantic family in which one finds, first of all, in Irish, Gothic, or High German, the values of movement, oriented displacement, voyage, ‘tending toward’.”⁴³ This third element is captured in the French word *sens*, which in addition to naming the organ of immediate apprehension and ideal meaning or signification, can also be used to mean “direction.” Nancy’s point is that all sense happens in the exposure of beings—necessarily plural—to each other. Once again, beings that are not exposed, not separated from themselves and oriented toward each other, cannot *be*.

⁴¹ Nancy (2002, p. 30).

⁴² Nancy (2003a, p. 9).

⁴³ Nancy (1997, p. 12).

From this it follows that meaning cannot be conceived as fully present in the interior of beings, but must rather be conceived as something that arises at their limits. Limit is conceived here as “the end, the extremity beyond which there is nothing more—nothing more, at least, of the thing or the being of which one reaches the limit.... It is immediately and conjointly the strict contour of an ‘inside’ *and* the design or outline of an ‘outside.’”⁴⁴ Limit, in other words, gives a kind of propriety, an interiority that would be the being’s own, but a propriety that is necessarily exposed to an exteriority that ceaselessly interrupts it. Sense happens nowhere else than at this limit where beings are exposed to each other. The sense that arises at the limit is not sense as signification, as fixed, determinate meaning. What arises is rather the very origin of meaning, the birth to presence that is not yet a determinate presence, a present *something*.⁴⁵ What arises, then, is precisely the unbinding of the being from its proper meaning, a kind of sense without signification.⁴⁶

IV. Dignity and Singularity

The being whose proper meaning is interrupted by its exposure at the limit is what Nancy calls a singular. And with this notion of singularity we approach once again the question of dignity. The singular *qua* singular is not the particular, which is an instance of a general signification. *Qua* particulars, our values are entirely commensurable. As a particular human being, I am a professor, a philosopher, a friend, etc. When I am present to my students as a professor, I am present as an instance of the general kind “professor,” and can thus be evaluated in comparison with others of that same kind. Whatever value I have *qua* professor is necessarily relative. Insofar as we are present to each other as

⁴⁴ Nancy (2003b, pp. 103, 104).

⁴⁵ Nancy (2003a, p. 27).

⁴⁶ Nancy (2003b, p.104); Nancy (2002, p. 104).

particulars, then, Schopenhauer's insight about the relativity of value is entirely correct. And indeed it is not false to say that I am a particular—that I *am* a professor, a philosopher, a friend, etc. But it would be false to suggest that the meanings I embody *qua* particular constitute the whole of my meaning. As a finite singular being, exposed at the limit to an exteriority that is never simply mine, I am more than the fixed significations that I instantiate: I am the site of the very emergence of meaning, and as such utterly incommensurable.⁴⁷

The incommensurability of the singular is reflected, Nancy thinks, in the common expression “people are strange.” Sense surges up, each time new and each time precariously, in the *to* of our presentation to each other. Because of this, the other to whom we are present is given as more than a mere token of a type: He is given as strange. “The other origin is incomparable or inassimilable, not because it is simply “other” but because it is an origin and touch of meaning.... You are absolutely strange because the world begins *its turn with you*.”⁴⁸ We lack access to this incommensurable origin of sense not because it is concealed so deeply in the interior of the subject—whether as *imago dei* or as transcendental freedom—but because the origin is not a something. The origin happens as an ever-renewed creation of the world *ex nihilo*, and it happens right here in the world, right at the limit where we encounter each other.

If dignity is given along with singularity, which is itself given as something in excess of what a person can make his or her own, then what can it mean to say that a person *has* dignity? What, in other words, is the locus of that dignity? It cannot be the case that a person's dignity has its locus in the intelligible significations that state who or

⁴⁷ Nancy (2000, pp. 74-75).

⁴⁸ Nancy (2000, p. 6).

what that person is. One does not have dignity because of one's being well born or wealthy, or even virtuous. When the dignity of an elderly, cognitively impaired resident in a nursing home is violated, it is not she *qua* grandmother, *qua* Catholic, *qua* American citizen, or even *qua* human being who is wronged. Nor, of course, is it she *qua* possessor of sensible qualities—blue eyes, for example, or a certain height. Dignity, as we have seen, eludes the duality of sensible and intelligible sense. It is rather she *simpliciter* whose dignity is violated. Nancy's emphasis on a third and more basic, directional moment of sense gives us important resources for understanding what that can mean. For Nancy, a person's dignity would be *right at* the person. This admittedly awkward locution "right at" translates the French idiom, "*à même*," which Nancy uses very frequently. To say that dignity is right at the person is to say that it is inseparable from the person, as intimate as anything can possibly be, but that it is nonetheless not the person's own, not his or her possession. This dignity that is right at the person is that to which the person is oriented and exposed, but which is itself never completely given.

This conception of dignity as being right at the person helps to account for our apparently contradictory experience of dignity as something absolutely proper, uniquely our own, but also as something we are always in danger of losing. The meanings that define my life happen at my limit: My being a friend, for example, is a part of who I am in a very real and practically important sense, and I can only be a friend in the context of my exposure to others who respond to me as such. But even more basically than that, I am *somebody*—somebody who matters, someone whose projects and perspectives are worthy of being taken seriously—only as being-with. On the one hand, my quality of being somebody who matters is more intimately my own than any other; there are many

people who would rather die than surrender that basic dignity. On the other hand, because my dignity, my being a somebody, happens as an event of sense right at the limit in my encounters with others, I am always vulnerable to others who might relate to me as if I were a nobody. If this were not the case—if we were perfectly secure in our possession of dignity—then the duties of respect we have both for others and for ourselves would be superfluous. But I think it is fair to say that we do not experience those duties as superfluous; it matters to us a great deal whether or not we are treated in accordance with something like the Formula of Humanity. If we are not, we feel that we have been deprived not only of something very valuable, but also of something to which we can make a rightful claim.

Finally, I believe that we can account for the genuine bindingness of the obligation to respect dignity by returning to something like the Kantian doctrine of the fact of reason. In this case, the relevant fact is just that there can be no *epoché* of sense, that we find ourselves exposed always already to a sense that exceeds determinate and appropriable sense. This sense happens, as we have seen, only at the limit where beings encounter one another. And as Jean-François Lyotard once remarked in a very different context, “nobody is the master of encounters.”⁴⁹ Given the ontology of being singular plural, I cannot even in principle control the event of sense that happens in my relations with others. In being-with, rather, I experience a radical passivity right at the most originary level of my opening out onto the world. As strange, as origin of the sense of the world, the other is given to me precisely as demanding respect, as a self-originating source of valid claims. Indeed, the validity of the other’s claim is given to me even before I know what the claim is. Modifying the formulation of Lévi-Strauss, we could say that

⁴⁹ Lyotard (1993, p. 41).

there is an obligation of respect for the other even before we can know what that obligation is. And this explains the Kantian claim that being contemptuous of others “is in every case contrary to duty.”⁵⁰ It is not for me to determine unilaterally the other’s value. Even if I rightly judge the person to have a low value in this or that respect, it remains the case that the other has a value that exceeds my determination or anyone else’s.

With this, in conclusion, I hope to have shown that Schopenhauerian skepticism is fundamentally mistaken and that dignity is far from being a useless or stupid concept. Absolute and incommensurable value not only can be given in our experience, but *is* given during the course of our most ordinary, everyday engagements with the world. And close attention to how this value is given confirms at least the basic features of dignity as they have been articulated in Kantian moral philosophy.

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⁵⁰ Kant (1996c, p. 579 [6:463]).

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