
18. DIGNITY AND SELECTIVE SELF-PRESENTATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Human dignity can be a puzzling phenomenon upon first consideration. Often we ascribe it in full measure to all individuals at all times, thus treating it as an inseparable aspect of human personhood—something that can no more be lost or diminished than the most basic of human rights. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹ provides a prominent example of this approach to dignity when it begins with its recognition of the inherency and equality of dignity among all members of the human family. Yet our ascriptions of dignity are, at other times, moderated in the light of individuals' circumstance, condition, or behavior. When characters in Jonathan Larson's *Rent* sing "Will I lose my dignity?" the question they pose is presumably not to be settled by a reminder of the truth that the UN Declaration is driving at in its opening lines. A laborer might justifiably complain that her working environment is degrading, and petition for a more dignity-friendly state of affairs. I might seek to preserve my dignity by avoiding the public expression of my feelings for certain others. In such cases, dignity seems both gradational and alienable: it's the sort of thing that people can lose as well as retain, have more or less of.

In the next section, I will propose a solution to this puzzle—an explanation of why human dignity seems both nongradational and inalienable, on the one hand, and gradational and alienable, on the other. According to my solution, our ascriptions of dignity sometimes pertain to a basic capacity, at other times to a disposition, and at other times yet to a kind of behavior. Because our understanding of the sort of dignity at play in ascriptions of the first two sorts requires an understanding of the sort of dignity involved in ascriptions of the third sort,

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1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNGA Res. 217A (III) (10 Dec 1948) UN Doc A/810 at 71.

I will spend a considerable amount of time in Section III exploring the latter, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that when we ascribe dignity to behavior we single that behavior out as a kind of selective self-presentation. In Section IV, I will then use this selective self-presentation account to illuminate dignity as it pertains to a basic capacity and a disposition, as well as to explore the value of dignity in each of its central forms. I will then conclude in Section V by showing how the account of dignity I defend can be put to good use in explaining (and justifying) a common sentiment to the effect that the use of certain information systems in the networked society threatens to depersonalize individuals within the systems by diminishing their dignity in important ways.

II. THREE TYPES OF HUMAN DIGNITY

One step toward resolving the puzzle just highlighted is to follow the lead of Meyer² and distinguish between *having dignity* and *acting with dignity*. To have dignity, the thought goes, is to have a certain capacity—the capacity to act with dignity. And the possession of a capacity to act in a certain manner is not necessarily diminished by occasional action in some contrary manner. Consider the moral capacity to engage others with sensitivity. That one does, on occasion, act in an insensitive manner does not show that one lacks this capacity; it might remain in full force even if, on such an occasion, one fails to exercise it. So too, perhaps, with dignity: as a capacity to act in a dignified manner, it may well be something that all individuals possess in full measure at all times despite the fact that, due to the specifics of certain situations in which they find themselves, they fail to act in a dignified manner.

The comparison with sensitivity, however, suggests that the distinction between having and acting with dignity only takes us part of the way toward resolving the puzzle. For there seem to be cases in which one can fail to be sensitive in a sense that goes beyond merely failing to act with sensitivity. Sometimes we treat an individual as insensitive *because* her behavior is insensitive: the behavior counts as evidence that she fails to have an adequate degree of sensitivity. And it seems that an analogous point holds with respect to human dignity. Deficiencies of dignity along behavioral lines can serve as evidence of deficiencies along characterological lines.

To illustrate, imagine an individual whose life exemplifies an extreme version of the ancient Greek practical philosophy known as cynicism. We may call him Diogenes without implying anything about how closely he resembles

2. M. Meyer, "Dignity, Rights, and Self-Control," *Ethics* 99 (1989): 520–34; "Dignity, Death, and Modern Virtue," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995): 45–55; "The Simple Dignity of Sentient Life: Speciesism and Human Dignity," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32 (2001): 115–26.

the historical cynic of the same name (who, you might recall, once suggested to a fawning Alexander the Great that the greatest honor the king could grant him was that of moving a little to the side so that he could continue to soak up the sun's rays). Our fictitious Diogenes is strongly driven by the lead of impulse and completely ignores any inhibiting social conventions. In a way that might remind a dog owner of her lovable companion (recall the etymology of "cynic"—the original Greek *κυνικός* means "like a dog"), Diogenes makes no attempt to hide whatever inclinations and appetites he happens to find coming his way, satisfying them whenever and wherever he can. Bodily functions that we would normally consider to be deeply private he carries out in full view of whoever happens to be in his presence. He says whatever comes to mind, regardless of who it might happen to offend or of how it might make him appear to others. Simply put, Diogenes lets it all hang out, always.

It seems that we can say three things about Diogenes. First, he remains quite capable in a fundamental sense of acting with dignity, should he so choose. He regularly does not choose, led as he is by the drive of impulse, but this does not remove his basic capacity to do so. Second, his behavior is massively lacking in dignity: his life consists of one undignified act after another. Third, Diogenes has little or no dignity. And this last point is not merely another way of putting the previous one: it is rather to say that, precisely because of his undignified behavior, we are inclined to say that he has no dignity.

A further distinction drawn from a virtue-theoretic approach to ethics may help more fully to resolve the seeming paradox in our ascriptions of dignity. In the second book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the virtues cannot be considered mere capacities because, unlike capacities, they are acquired by a process of repeated practice—habituation—and not simply bestowed on us by nature. "Nature gives us the capacity to acquire them," he writes, "and completion comes through habituation."³ Part of being human is being capable of virtuous activity. But, Aristotle reasons, it is neither the capacity nor the activity of which virtue consists. It cannot be the activity itself, because we often appeal to the possession of virtue to explain the occurrence of virtuous activity. The reason why someone acts with sensitivity, for example, might very well be that she is a sensitive person—has the virtue of sensitivity. Nor can virtue be identified with the capacity to act virtuously, for in that case all humans would be born virtuous and have no need of the right sort of habituation to acquire it. Moreover, we often praise an individual for her possession of a virtue, but we do not typically praise her merely for the possession of a capacity that she was naturally given. (This even though we may value her possession of the capacity, very highly.) The virtues, Aristotle concludes, are thus best thought of as deep-seated *dispositions* to virtuous activity—that is, firmly entrenched features of one's

3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. R. Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [c. 350 BCE] 2000), II.i, 1103a18–26.

psyche that incline one toward doing the right thing with the right sort of motivation in the relevant context of action.

The practice or habituation by which such dispositions are acquired amounts to repeated performance of the relevant virtuous activity in the relevant context of action. The more the right activity is performed with the right sort of motivation, the more the inclination so to perform it becomes dispositionally ingrained in her as second nature; the less it is performed with the right motivation, the less the inclination and, typically, the less the degree of virtue.⁴

The dispositional nature of the virtues thus distinguishes them from mere capacities for virtuous activity. It is also what makes them, unlike capacities, the sort of things that can be acquired, lost, diminished, and increased, depending on what sorts of activities one engages in, that is, on one's practice of virtue. I suggest that similar points can be applied to human dignity. Sometimes when we talk of human dignity, we talk of the basic human capacity for dignified action; at other times, we talk of a disposition toward dignified action, and at other times yet we talk of dignified action itself. In the first sense—call it “natural dignity”—we refer to something that is both inalienable and nongradational. All humans who are capable of acting at all have natural dignity, regardless of their circumstance, condition, or behavior. (This applies even to the severely impaired: the range of actions open to them may be very different from the range open to others, but with respect to the actions that are open to them, they remain as capable of acting with dignity as anyone else.) In the second sense, which I'll call “robust dignity,” we denote something that is both alienable (indeed, that may never be had at all) and gradational, as with the “practical dignity” of the third sense. And, as in the case of the virtues conceived along the lines suggested by Aristotle, the degree of one's dignity in the second sense will be largely a function of the degree of dignity in the third sense—a function of how much practice at dignity one has had.

The distinction between natural, robust, and practical dignity, then, allows us more fully to resolve the aforementioned puzzle. And it explains the intuition that Diogenes, while remaining capable of dignified action, is nonetheless not possessed of dignity, where this means something more than the indignity of his behavior. Diogenes has natural dignity, but he has little or no robust dignity, as is made manifest by his massive lack of dignity along practical lines.

III. PRACTICAL DIGNITY AS SELECTIVE SELF-PRESENTATION

Natural and robust dignity are conceptually parasitic upon practical dignity. To understand them more fully, then, we would do well to turn our attention to the latter. What is it for an individual to act with dignity?

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.i, 1103b8–24 (n. 3).

One account may be derived from Dworkin's approach to the right to dignity.⁵ An individual's right to dignity, he suggests, is best thought of as "the right that others acknowledge his genuine critical interests: that they acknowledge that he is the kind of creature, and has the moral standing, such that it is intrinsically, objectively important how his life goes."⁶ Dignity itself as a feature of individuals, then, on Dworkin's approach, would seem to be the condition of having this sort of acknowledgment or recognition from others. We may sum up this sort of acknowledgment by calling it a form of *respect*. Although respect has to do with valuing, not just any valuing counts. I may value my car, my computer's processing power, and the plentiful supply of food in my region of the world, but it would be odd to say that I *respect* such things. I do, however, respect my wife, my family, and my friends. In the one sort of case, the value is of an instrumental sort, where the objects of value are valued insofar as they serve as instruments for the acquisition of other things of value. In the other sort of case—that of respect—the value is intrinsic. And I may be said to respect the actions of others to the extent that I value them as a result of the respect that I have for others as the agents of action. On the Dworkin-inspired "respect account," accordingly, an individual's practical dignity consists of her acting in ways that are respected by others.

It is surely correct that dignity is importantly related to respect. The etymology of the term itself suggests this, with the original Latin *dignitas* meaning the quality of being worthy of respect. But there is a large gap between being worthy of respect (respectability) and actually being respected (respectedness). The respect account tells us, in effect, that the respectability of actions supervenes on their respectedness—that the feature in virtue of which actions are worthy of respect is simply their being respected.

To see the implausibility of this claim, consider a society that is largely populated by extreme cynics such as our fictitious Diogenes. Not only do most members of this society typically let it all hang out, they are further driven instinctively to preserve the social conditions for doing so by constantly denigrating and ridiculing the actions of those very few members of their society who do not share their cynical lifestyle. Imagine now one such noncynic, Xanthippe. Xanthippe's life in cynical society is far from easy, but she remains steadfast in her conviction about the importance of living a dignified life, and does her best to act accordingly. Are her efforts doomed? Can she act in a largely respectable, dignified manner? On the respect account, the answer is "no," but this just seems wrong. Xanthippe can act with respectability and dignity, difficult as it may be to do so on a regular basis, despite the fact that her actions are not respected by her fellow citizens.

5. R. Dworkin, *Life's Dominion: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

6. Dworkin, *Life's Dominion*, 236 (n. 5).

Feinberg⁷ suggests⁸ an alternative account of practical dignity that attempts to locate the respectable character of dignified action not in considerations of actual respect, but rather in its connection to the business of claiming one's rights. Feinberg asks us to imagine a world without rights, "Nowheresville." Nowheresville could, he stresses, be a world that is saturated with such valuable things as benevolence, sympathy, and the recognition that it is in some sense fitting to praise, blame, reward, and punish people for certain sorts of behavior. But it would not be a world in which anyone could legitimately *claim* their just deserts. To claim that something is one's just desert is to do more than merely point out that it is fitting for one to have it and that it would be benevolent of others to provide it; it is further to assert that it is fitting for one to have it because not having it amounts to a wrong. It may be fitting and benevolent to award an employee with a gratuity for excellent work, but it is not wrong to withhold the gratuity in the way that it would be wrong to refuse agreed upon wages for work performed. With Nowheresville's absence of rights, Feinberg argues, its inhabitants can at best appeal to the benevolence or sense of fittingness of others to get what they want, in cases where the getting requires the others' say-so. What the inhabitants of Nowheresville cannot do is properly claim what they want from others.

The absence of rights in Nowheresville implies the absence of legitimate claims, according to Feinberg. But this in turn, he suggests, implies that no one is worthy of respect in such a world, however much they are valued. Where no legitimate claims are possible, no one has the capacity to make such claims, and in Feinberg's view the capacity to make them is what being worthy of respect is all about.⁹ And so it turns out that the inhabitants of Nowheresville have no dignity.

If this is what dignity as a basic capacity is—the capacity to claim one's rights—then practical dignity would seem on this "claimant account" to amount to acting so as to claim one's rights. The account at least has the virtue of being able to explain why it is that Xanthippe can act with dignity in a society full of Diogeneses. However much the other members of her society fail to respect her actions, Xanthippe surely retains those fundamental moral entitlements we call her rights. And as long as she continues to claim those rights, difficult as it may be in the hostile environment in which she finds herself, she can properly be

7. J. Feinberg, "The Nature and Value of Rights," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 4 (1970): 243–57.

8. I say "suggests" because Feinberg does not explicitly offer an account of practical dignity itself. What he offers is an account of what I have called natural dignity, that is, an account of the basic capacity to act with dignity. The suggested account of practical dignity is drawn out by inference from this account of natural dignity.

9. Feinberg, "The Nature and Value of Rights," 252 (n. 7).

said to be acting with dignity. What the claimant account gets right and the respect account gets wrong, in other words, is that the dignity of an individual's behavior is not contingent upon the approbation of others.

Even so, the claimant account seems to go too far in identifying practical dignity with the claiming of one's rights. Although dignified action can in various instances involve claiming one's rights, there are other instances in which claiming one's rights is a distinctly undignified matter, as can be seen in Meyer's apt example of the "bumptious man." The bumptious man "has a strong tendency to claim his rights too vehemently and at all the wrong times, seemingly asserting that people are always on the verge of denying him his rights."¹⁰ He is in the constant business of claiming his rights. On the claimant account, then, it should turn out that his behavior is among the most dignified in the world. But it is not. Indeed, the behavior of the bumptious man is highly undignified. His constant claiming of his rights is motivated by an overwhelming fear that others do not really respect him, and where it is manifestly motivated in this sort of way, the activity of claiming one's rights, however proper in and of itself, is the very paradigm of indignity.

Moreover, acting so as to claim one's rights does not even seem to be necessary for practical dignity. Meyer provides a further example to illustrate. Suppose that a member of a town's racial minority encounters the town schnook, whose well-known, pathetic habit it is to wander around insulting everyone he encounters. In the face of the schnook's offensive racial insults, the member of the racial minority might understandably be tempted to react in just the way he would react when confronted with the town's bigots. Yet, whereas to protest the insults of the bigots—and thereby claim his rights—might be precisely what dignity requires, a similar protestation against the schnook's insults might well be *beneath* his dignity: "It is quite possible that he chooses what he sees as the dignified expression: to control his anger and ignore the dolt."¹¹

Perhaps the counterexamples that Meyer raises provide an important clue as to the nature of practical dignity. What is striking about the bumptious man is that he is severely lacking in self-control: his behavior is largely determined by the overwhelming fears and worries that grip him. The dignified member of the racial minority, by contrast, is very much self-controlled: despite the understandable temptation to silence the schnook's sad behavior, he keeps his anger in check and does not allow it to overwhelm him. In the case where there is a lack of self-control, we find undignified action; in the case where self-control is present, we find dignified action. Thus Meyer proffers a "self-control account" of practical dignity,¹² where to act with dignity is to act in a self-controlled manner, that is, to act in such

10. Meyer, "Dignity, Rights, and Self-Control," 525 (n. 2).

11. *Ibid.*

12. Meyer, "Dignity, Rights, and Self-Control," 526–527 (n. 2) and "Dignity, Death, and Modern Virtue," 51ff. (n. 2).

a way that one's action is not the result of being dominated by any of one's own internal fears, appetites, or impulses, or by the external influence of others.

The self-control account has much to be said for it. It has an undeniable historical appeal, as it reflects a nascent strand of thinking about dignity that runs throughout Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment rationalism, and twentieth-century existentialism. Compare Pico's famous suggestion that human dignity derives from the distinctly human capacity for self-determination—for being a "self-shaper" of one's nature¹³—, Kant's claim that autonomy, or the capacity for self-legislation, is "the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational creature,"¹⁴ and Sartre's exposition of the existentialist insight that, for humans, "existence precedes essence"¹⁵; that is, proper human function is not predetermined but, rather, set only by what humans find themselves doing after they make an appearance in this world. Moreover, the account not only yields the intuitively correct verdict in the cases of the bumptious man and dignified member of a racial minority; it further provides a compelling explanation of why our fictitious Diogenes virtually never acts with dignity, and of why Xanthippe can so act despite finding herself surrounded by a society of disrespectful Diogeneses. Diogenes's behavior is massively lacking in dignity, according to the self-control account, because it is not self-controlled; it is rather controlled by whatever impulses he happens to find coming his way. And, despite the lack of respect from her fellow citizens, Xanthippe distinguishes herself from them precisely by not giving in to the heteronomy of impulse that largely governs their behavior.

Still, I think that the self-control account fails to recognize a central feature of dignified action that both the respect account and claimant account, for all their drawbacks, do: dignified action is an essentially social phenomenon, in the sense that for one to act with dignity is for one's behavior to be importantly related to others. On the self-control account, no significant relation to others is implied at all by acting with dignity, because self-controlled behavior can be a socially isolated occurrence.

Suppose, for example, that while on a solitary hiking expedition in the wilderness I joyously sing my way through Manrico's lines in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. I revel in the emotional release of imitating the likes of Giuseppe di Stefano, and of imagining Maria Callas's moving replies. Consonant with my abilities, the singing is awful. But I do not care; there is no one around to hear me, after all. However self-controlled

13. G. Pico della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," tr. E. Livermore in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. E. Cassirer et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1486] 1948), § 3.

14. I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, tr. H.J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, [1785] 1964), 103.

15. J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialisme est un humanisme* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947).

my behavior is in this situation, I think it would be odd to say that it is a manifestation of dignity. And even if it is a matter of great abandon, the very paradigm of a temporary lack of self-control, it would be just as odd to say that my behavior is undignified. To say that it is undignified implies that I bear the wrong sort of relation to others by engaging in it, just as to say that it is dignified implies that I bear the right sort of relation to others by so doing. Yet such relational conditions are not satisfied, because I'm all by myself.

So even if practical dignity does involve a form of self-control, not just any self-controlled action counts. It must be self-controlled action with a social face—a “performance” in Goffman’s famous sense¹⁶—because it must involve a significant relation between the agent of the action and other individuals. I want, accordingly, to propose a new account of practical dignity that preserves its essentially social face. On what I will call the “selective self-presentation account,”¹⁷ to act with dignity is to present aspects of oneself to others in a selective manner, that is, to reveal information about oneself to different individuals, in different contexts, in accord with one’s considered convictions about the appropriateness of doing so. That the presentation of aspects of oneself is selective—effected in accord with one’s considered convictions—is what makes dignified action a kind of self-control. But because on the selective self-presentation account it is only self-presentation—action that involves the epistemic relation of revelation of aspects of oneself to others—that has the potential to be evaluated from the point of view of dignity, not just any self-controlled action is relevant to dignity concerns, and practical dignity turns out to be an essentially social phenomenon.

In this light, the selective self-presentation account provides a good explanation of why my solitary vocal behavior in the wilderness is at most a case of nondignified action—neither dignified nor undignified. The singing does not involve the presentation of aspects of myself to others, and hence, regardless of the amount of self-control with which I effect it, it is not a candidate for being evaluated positively or negatively from the point of view of dignity. Moreover, when it comes to the sorts of cases that proved problematic for the respect and claimant accounts, the selective self-presentation account seems to fare quite well. The member of the racial minority who declines to dignify the town schnook’s insults with a

16. E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1959).

17. For the language of “self-presentation,” as well as for the initial inspiration to think of the connection between dignity and self-presentation, I am particularly indebted to a very engaging discussion of what is involved in our sense of shame in J. D. Velleman, “The Genesis of Shame,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30 (2001): 27–52. In my view Velleman quite rightly connects our sense of shame with our interest in being self-presenting creatures, though he seems to me to underemphasize the essentially social (or public) nature of self-presentation.

response is acting with a great deal of dignity, because, by presenting only a calm exterior, he refuses to give the schnook the satisfaction of knowing anything about the extent to which he is upset by the inane gibberish. The bumptious man acts in a highly undignified manner because he engages in acts of self-presentation that are not selective: he reveals to others on a regular basis just how strongly he is gripped by the sorts of fears and anxieties that drive his rights-claiming behavior. Xanthippe manifests dignity in her behavior, in contrast¹⁸ with undignified behavior of the Diogeneses who surround her, because, unlike them, she does not allow her acts of self-presentation to be determined simply by whatever impulses happen to come her way.

The selective self-presentation account also affords us a useful explanation of how the invasion of privacy can amount to an assault upon one's dignity. Simply put, on the selective self-presentation account, invasions of privacy can in various contexts transform an individual's behavior from the nondignified to the undignified by altering the epistemic relations carried by the behavior.

This can be seen by adding to the *Il Trovatore* scenario a busybody who roams the area in search of scandalous tidbits about individuals who believe themselves to be alone in the wilderness. Having spied my initial entry into the woods, he follows my path until eventually discovering the spot where I have stopped to devote my full vocal energies to a favorite part in Manrico's lyrics. Surprised but highly amused that anyone with such poor abilities would attempt such a difficult vocal feat, even in private, the busybody begins recording my behavior with his zoom-lens, long-range-microphone audio-video recorder. I continue on with great vigor, unaware that a substantial portion of my performance is being captured for purposes of my eventual humiliation before an audience of the busybody's friends and family.

The busybody has obviously invaded my privacy. And there is a strong intuition that he has, ipso facto, impugned my dignity. In some way, his covert action has rendered my vocal behavior of negative value on the dignity scale. How so? Prior to encountering me, my singing bore no significant epistemic relations to any others, and was thus outside the scope of dignity evaluation.

18. One might suggest that Diogenes's actions (like those of most of his fellow citizens) turn out to be dignified on the selective self-presentation account—the idea being that he simply has different (much more liberal, say) standards of selective self-presentation, that is, unusual considered convictions about the appropriateness of revealing things about himself in different contexts to different individuals. That, however, is not how Diogenes was meant to be taken in Section I. It is not that he is merely possessed of very liberal standards of selective self-presentation, but rather that he has (for whatever original philosophical motivations) given up on the whole business of selective self-presentation. Compare the individual who gains a large amount of weight due to purposeful overeating (a Sumo wrestler, e.g.) with the individual who gains excessive weight as a result of abandoning any attempt at diet-monitoring and allowing unhealthy gustatory impulses to drive the show. Diogenes is more like the latter than the former individual.

With the busybody's intrusion into my privacy, however, that activity becomes, unbeknownst to me, an exercise in self-presentation: I now reveal a lot about my vocal abilities, attitudes, and emotional states—to him, at the very least, and potentially to the wider audience of his friends and family. And the self-presentation that he forces on me is not effected in accord with my considered convictions about the appropriateness of revelations of this sort. Indeed, were I to be made aware of the busybody's intrusion, I would surely protest both his observation and recording. His invasion of my privacy thus transforms my singing from something that is neither dignified nor undignified to something that is positively undignified—from something that is not an exercise in self-presentation at all to an exercise in nonselective self-presentation. He renders my behavior deficient in practical dignity.

When discussing the respect account of practical dignity, I noted that dignity does seem to be importantly tied to respectability, if not actual respect as the respect theorist would have it. Does the selective self-presentation account that I have here offered accommodate this insight? How does selective self-presentation relate to respectable action?

For an action to be respectable in the relevant sense of being worthy of respect by others, it must be such that others are able to see the agent of the action as a person—as an autonomous individual capable of self-control. But this in turn requires that others have reason to believe that the agent is capable of self-controlled action. And the connection between selective self-presentation and respectable action emerges plainly when we consider that it is precisely in acts of selective self-presentation that others acquire reason to see an individual as capable of self-controlled action. Self-controlled actions alone will not do the trick, for, as we have seen, such actions can take place in isolated contexts where they effect no significant relations between others and the agent of action. If *all* of my self-controlled actions were like my singing of *Il Trovatore*, others would never have reason to believe that I am self-controlled, because they would never bear the epistemic relations to me whereby they come to know that my actions are not merely driven by my internal fears, appetites, or impulses, or by the external influence of other people. It is in this sense, then, that practical dignity on the selective self-presentation account stands as a necessary condition on respectable action: absent acts of selective self-presentation on her part, others would have no reason to believe that an individual is self-controlled, and would thus have no grounds for seeing her as a person.

IV. THE NATURE AND VALUE OF NATURAL AND ROBUST DIGNITY

With the selective self-presentation account of practical dignity now before us, we have a clear way of spelling out the nature of the other two forms of dignity mentioned in Section II. If practical dignity amounts to selective self-presentation,

then natural dignity turns out to be the characteristically human capacity for selective self-presentation, and robust dignity the disposition toward selective self-presentation.

Moreover, the value of natural and robust dignity, on the selective self-presentation account, can be drawn out in connection with respectability as a person. Practical dignity, as we have seen, is required in some measure to have even a minimal degree of respectability as a person. Because natural dignity is also so required—a being with no capacity whatsoever for selective self-presentation is one whose behavior could never amount to acts of selective self-presentation—its value stems, at least in part, from its role as a necessary condition on the possession of even a minimal degree of respectability as a person.

But of course, we also value degrees of respectability beyond the minimal, and it is in light of this fact, I think, that the value of robust dignity emerges on the selective self-presentation account. Practical dignity, together with the natural dignity it requires, is necessary for the set of reasons that others have for seeing one as a person to be nonempty. The value of robust dignity stems from its tendency to populate that set with a large and varied number of elements. The more one is disposed to acts of selective self-presentation, the more one's behavior in the presence of others will involve acts of selective self-presentation. And the more such acts one performs, the greater the number and variety of reasons that others will have for seeing one as a person. Thus, natural dignity is valuable because without it, there would be no respectability of the person at all. Robust dignity is valuable because of the part it plays in making for robust respectability of the person.

V. DIGNITY, DEPERSONALIZATION, AND AUTOMATED HUMAN IDENTIFICATION SYSTEMS

There is a strong intuition that the use of certain information systems in the networked society carries a depersonalization effect for individuals within the systems. In this closing section, I want to draw attention to the way in which the selective self-presentation account of dignity that I have presented helps us to make sense of this intuition.

To illustrate what I have in mind when I talk of a “depersonalization effect,” consider Goffman’s classic discussion of the ways in which “total institutions”—institutions such as prisons, concentration camps, and asylums, where virtually every aspect of an individual’s location, social life, and behavior is strictly governed so as to accord with a general plan aimed at fulfilling the putative aims of the institution—carry out a “mortification of the self” on the institutionalized individual.¹⁹

19. E. Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961).

The mortification involves a diminishment of the individual's respectability as a person insofar as it decreases the ability of others (e.g., other inmates, institutional employees) to see her as a person, and it constitutes a paradigm example of depersonalization. Chief among the ways in which it is carried out in the context of total institutions is by the entrenchment of deeply privacy-invasive techniques, which include stripping the individual of "identity kits" (e.g., sets of cosmetic aids and distinctive clothing whereby, outside of the institution, she might have exercised some measure of control over certain aspects of her appearance), depriving her of personal spaces wherein she might have concealed various intimate activities, forcing her to reveal sensitive facts about her relationships to others, and rendering futile her attempts to distance herself from proscribed actions that she has performed.²⁰

The privacy-invasive techniques entrenched in the institutions have the effect of rendering the institutionalized individual's activities largely exercises in *nonselective* self-presentation: "On the inside," those activities no longer tend to reveal aspects of herself to others in accord with *her own* considered convictions about the appropriateness of revelation, but rather in accord with *institutional* convictions and standards. The privacy-invasive techniques thus lead to a diminishment of the institutionalized individual's practical dignity on the selective self-presentation account.

Recall now the point that robust dignity requires the right sort of practice, which in turn requires ample opportunities to act with dignity. The privacy-invasive techniques of the total institution drastically reduce this set of opportunities, and thereby serve as a barrier to the institutionalized individual's development of robust dignity. Because robust dignity is, as I have argued, the central means whereby the individual's respectability as a person is expanded, the depersonalization of the institutionalized individual that occurs in a total institution can thus be said to affect her respectability as a person in a very deep way: it cuts the practical lifeline whereby she might hope to develop robust respectability as a person.

My suggestion is that the intuition of depersonalization by means of inclusion in certain information systems of the networked society can be explained along similar lines. For purposes of the present discussion, I will take an *information system* to be an organization of people and technologies aimed at the acquisition and management of information of a certain type, where the relevant type helps to distinguish the sort of information system in question.²¹ A *human identification system* is an information system that is primarily aimed at the

20. Goffman, *Asylums*, 20–38 (n. 19).

21. I take this characterization to be broadly consistent with standard definitions in information systems theory. Cf., B. Langefors, *Theoretical Analysis of Information Systems*, Vol. 1. (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1966), 143; and J. Laudon & K. Laudon, *Essentials of Management Information Systems*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 7.

acquisition and management of identifying information about a subset of the people involved in the system. Talk of “identifying information” may here be construed quite broadly, as any empirical information about the identities of specific persons. Because the identities of specific persons are various and multifaceted,²² this will include large swaths of information about (for example) the names, behavior patterns, locations, addresses, social connections, political affiliations, medical conditions, and financial statuses of specific persons.

The networked society is particularly well-suited to facilitate the use of *automated human identification systems*, where these are to be distinguished from the historically more common *manual human identification systems*. In a manual human identification system, the acquisition of identifying information about individuals within the system depends centrally on those individuals engaging in regular acts of what Davis has called acts of “reflexive identifying,” that is, on those individuals voluntarily exposing identifying information about themselves to others on a regular basis through the use of certain technologies within the system.²³ Consider, for example, the “old-fashioned” use of verifying artifacts—picture ID cards, birth certificates, passports, passwords, and the like—for the authentication of legitimate access to various places or goods. This involves an organization of people (e.g., the bearers of the artifacts, those to whom the artifacts are presented) and technologies (e.g., the artifacts themselves) aimed at the acquisition and management of identifying information about a subset of people involved (viz. the bearers of the artifacts). But the acquisition of that information depends centrally on those in the subset voluntarily exposing the relevant identifying information about themselves: By presenting the artifacts, they generate various bits of identifying information about themselves within the system, for example, that they have legitimate access to the goods or places in question, that they did in fact access them at certain times, and so on; by withholding presentation, they prevent the acquisition of such information by the system.

In an automated human identification system, by contrast, the acquisition of identifying information about individuals within the system depends centrally not on those individuals engaging in regular acts of reflexive identifying, but rather on regular occurrences of automatic nonreflexive identifying, that is, on the identification of those individuals by automated technologies that form integral elements of the system. Radio-frequency human identification systems (“human RFID systems”) serve as primary examples of the sort of human identification system. In human RFID systems, individuals have digitally encoded microchip-transponders attached to (or implanted within) their bodies for the

22. Cf. G. Marx, “Identity and Anonymity: Some Conceptual Distinctions and Issues for Further Research,” in *Documenting Individual Identity*, ed. J. Caplan & J. Torpey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 311–327.

23. S. Davis, “The Epistemology of Identifying and Identification,” unpublished manuscript, 2007.

purpose of tracking their locations, movements, and activities, relative to a networked set of radio-frequency “decoders” or “readers.” The point of such systems is precisely to acquire identifying information about those individuals without having to rely on their engaging in regular, voluntary acts of reflexive identifying: the “chips,” in effect, do the individuals’ identifying for them.

To some, the automation of identification carried by automated human identification systems represents the latest welcome convenience of the networked society. Kerr’s firsthand experience with individuals involved in the implementation of one such system provides a nice illustration. Many “[saw] the [RFID] chip as original,” Kerr reports. “They [saw] it as convenient. They [saw] it as the future.”²⁴ Other reactions are much less enthusiastic, however, and serve to highlight the intuition of depersonalization on which I wish to focus. Consider, for example, the strong reaction of civil liberties groups to the 2004 decision of the Brittan Public School District in northern California to implement a human RFID system for purposes of monitoring student activity. “The monitoring of children with RFID tags is comparable to the tracking of cattle, shipment pallets, or very dangerous criminals in high-security prisons,” protested Cédric Laurant, Policy Counsel with the Electronic Privacy Information Center. “[C]ompelling children to be constantly tracked with RFID-trackable identity badges breaches their right to privacy and dignity as human beings.”²⁵ And the dominance of this sentiment among students themselves was captured in a joint letter to the Brittan Board of Trustees from representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and the Electronic Privacy Information Center. “Indeed,” the letter notes, “one parent told us that his child came home from school, threw the badge down on the table, and said ‘I’m a grocery item, a piece of meat. I’m an orange.’”²⁶

The intuition of depersonalization here expressed finds a compelling basis in the same sorts of considerations that ground the intuition brought out in Goffman’s discussion of total institutions, and the selective self-presentation account of dignity helps make these considerations explicit. The automation of identification within automated human identification systems—where what would be acts of reflexive identifying outside the system become acts of nonreflexive identifying

24. I. Kerr, “Not So Crazy about the Chips,” *Innovate Magazine* (Center for Innovation Law and Policy), Spring (2004): 35.

25. Electronic Privacy Information Center, “Parents and Civil Liberties Groups Urge School District to Terminate Use of Tracking Devices,” press release (February 8, 2005), http://epic.org/privacy/rfid/prs_rls-020705.html (accessed March 5, 2008).

26. American Civil Liberties Union, Electronic Frontier Foundation, & Electronic Privacy Information Center, “Letter to Mr. Don Hagland, Brittan Board of Trustees. Re: Safety and Civil Liberties Implications of Including Radio Frequency Identification Tags in Student Identity Badges” (February 7, 2005), <http://epic.org/privacy/rfid/brittan-letter.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2008).

within the system—amounts to a set of privacy-invasive procedures similar in kind, if not in degree, to the privacy-invasive techniques of the total institution, which tend to transform the activities of individuals within the system into exercises in *nonselective* self-presentation. Within an automated human identification system, in other words, the monitored individual's activities tend to reveal different things about her in accord with the *system's* standards of revelation, as contrasted with the standards set by *her own* considered convictions about appropriate revelation (which can be more closely followed in manual human identification systems). The automation thus leads to a diminishment of the individual's practical dignity on the selective self-presentation account. And this in turn—bearing in mind the point that robust dignity itself depends upon ample opportunities for dignified action—makes for a significant barrier to the individual's development of robust dignity. The selective self-presentation account thus brings out the depth of justification behind the intuition about the depersonalization of monitored individuals within automated human identification systems. The systems threaten to depersonalize in the sense of removing the central practical means whereby those individuals can develop robust dignity and expand—rather than shrink—the sets of reasons that others have for seeing them as persons.