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"Constructing a Dialogue on Dignity: Advocacy for Human Dignity as Global Institutions' Focus"¹

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Global institutions, from traditional intergovernmental institutions like the United Nations and World Bank to hybrid, multi-stakeholder arrangements like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria ("Global Fund"), have a crucial role in making human rights a reality. Not only do they play a role in norm-setting, reflected on paper in treaties ratified and laws enacted by governments, but in facilitating implementation. Implementation has fallen short of norm-setting worldwide, whereby billions of individuals lack meaningful access to basic freedoms, justice, and economic opportunity in their experienced lives (Khan 2009; Council on Foreign Relations 2013). This paper examines how a broader concept of "human dignity," based on twin pillars of agency and social recognition of individuals, could break through this rights-realization log-jam. The concept offers the basis for a heightened global, intercultural consensus for action—as the foundational premise for human rights and the grounds for judging whether human rights are being realized in practice. The paper explores how to advance a global dialogue to socially construct systemic change in global institutions to enlarge rights realization.

WHY: UNITY IN A NEOMEDIEVAL WORLD

The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 enshrined the recognition that the territorial state was the primary actor in the international system and the principle that these states enjoyed "sovereignty." What this principle meant was that for any international institution to possess political and legal legitimacy, it needed to be the creation of states. Accordingly, as states began to perceive the need for international organizations—first specific-purpose organizations, like the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, and later more general-purpose organizations, like the League of Nations—they created intergovernmental organizations through treaties requiring the consent of each member state. But new developments in international politics have raised questions about these assumptions. As early as 1977 in his classic work, *The Anarchical Society*, the late Oxford Professor Hedley Bull speculated that one possible future for international system was what he called a "neomedieval" structure. Under such an arrangement, Bull explained, states would still exist as important actors in the international system, but

alongside those states, there would be a variety of other dissimilar actors that would also play critical roles in international affairs. As Bull notes, the central element of such a neomedieval system would be “overlapping authority and multiple loyalties” (Bull 2002, 245). In other words, states would “come to share their authority over their citizens, and their ability to command their loyalties” with other actors (Bull 2002, 246). And as such, states would not be sovereign in the Westphalian sense of the term.

In *The Anarchical Society*, Bull suggested five trends that pointed to the possible emergence of a neomedieval system: (1) The Regional Integration of States; (2) The Disintegration of States; (3) The Restoration of Private International Violence; (4) Transnational Organizations; and (5) The Technological Unification of the World. Today, over a third of a century since Bull wrote, these trends have continued and seem to strongly suggest a movement toward a neomedieval world. First, it is commonplace to point to Europe as the primary example of regional integration. In the years since 1977, the European Economic Community has become the European Union (EU), more states have joined, and the depth of integration has increased. While the recent economic crisis in the Eurozone has caused some to speculate about the progress of European integration, it could certainly be argued that the transformative effect on the concept of state sovereignty has continued. Bull suggested that a critical juncture would be when there would “be real doubt in theory and in reality as to whether sovereignty lay with national governments or the organs of the ‘community’” (Bull 2002, 256). In the world of the twenty-first century, the organs of the EU clearly enjoy the ability to make decisions that are binding both upon the governments of the members, and in some cases, directly binding on individuals or corporations within member states. It may not be correct to say that the organs have “sovereignty,” but it certainly seems accurate to say that in some cases the organs have independent authority that was traditionally only held by states. Moreover, there seems to have also been a transformation of the loyalty of individuals; persons still have loyalty to their state, but there also seems for most to be an undefined loyalty to “Europe.” It should, of course, be noted that while the European experience has not led—in any real sense—to other such tight integration in other regions of the world, the very existence of even one such powerful regionally-integrated actor in the international system challenges the notion of Westphalia.

Second, there have been dramatic disintegrative tendencies. But, as Bull notes, for the state system to be fundamentally changed, it is not enough that there simply be new states emerging from larger ones, but that sub-state actors emerge with a level of autonomy that they challenge the sovereignty of the larger state. Bull explains:

If these new units were to advance far enough towards sovereign statehood both in terms of accepted doctrine and in terms of their command of force and human loyalties, to cast doubt upon the sovereignty of existing states, and yet at the same time were to stop short of claiming that state sovereignty for themselves, the situation might arise in which the institution of sovereignty itself might go into decline (Bull 2002, 257).

Clearly, since the end of the Cold War, small states emerged from larger states—witnessed by the break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and more recently Sudan. But at the same time, we have seen a variety of sub-state groups that both exercise control over people and receive their loyalty. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC),

and even criminal groups in parts of Latin America and elsewhere, are increasingly providing service and social welfare assistance to individuals, and are capturing a large measure of their loyalty.

Third, while one of the touchstones of sovereignty is the state's monopoly on the use of force, there has been a resurgence of private international violence in recent years. The most obvious manifestation of this non-state use of force is by trans-state political groups like Al Qaeda and its various progeny. The significance of the power of such groups can be seen in the days following September 11, 2001, when the United Nations (UN) Security Council acknowledged that these non-state actors can be held accountable for engaging in an armed attack in violation of the UN Charter and the subject of international sanctions, a penalty typically reserved for states. But what Bull notes as a particularly significant aspect of this increase in the use of violence by these non-state actors "is the fact that their claim of the right to do so is accepted as legitimate by a substantial proportion of international society" (Bull 2002, 259). As far back as the mid-1970s, there were elements of the international community that accorded a certain legitimacy to liberation movements and other groups seeking to fight "colonial," "racist," and "alien" regimes. Indeed, the Definition of Aggression Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 specifically mentioned "peoples under colonial and racist regimes [and] other forms of alien domination." It acknowledged "the right of these people to struggle to that end [self-determination] and to seek and receive support, in accordance with the principles of the [UN] Charter and in conformity with the above mentioned Declaration." Even though this right is couched in terms of the UN Charter, it seems clear that this resolution was seeking to lend great international legitimacy to sub-state actors using violence. Of course, the Soviet Union and its allies were well-known for supporting the use of force by sub-state groups fighting "wars of national liberation" (Arend and Beck 1993, 41). Indeed, even the United States recognized the legitimacy of violent anti-state actors in the 1980s, such as in Angola, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and Cambodia under the so-called "Reagan Doctrine" (Lagon 1994).

Since the 1970's, a wide-variety of groups have continued to gain international support, but more importantly, domestic populations have often accorded such non-state actors with legitimacy. As noted earlier, groups like Hezbollah, the FARC, and others have been providing good and services to individuals in circumstances where states have been unable, empowering these actors to gain loyalty traditionally reserved for the state.

Fourth, there has also been a proliferation of trans-state organizations, what Bull calls "transnational organizations." For Bull, these organizations run the gamut from transnational corporations (TNCs) to transnational political movements (including those that use violence) to professional associations to religious organizations to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to traditional intergovernmental institutions (IGOs). In recent years, the number and diversity of these organizations have grown and they have increasingly gained real power in the international system. The effects of some of the transnational political movements have already been noted above, but other organizations have also been playing critical roles. Despite the Westphalian turn away from a secular role for the Church, religious organizations have increasingly commanded the loyalty of people. And even transnational corporations have gained inroads on states. As the late Susan Strange wrote in her 1996 book, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in*

the World Economy, “we can conclude that while TNCs do not take over from the governments of states, they have certainly encroached on their domains of power.” “They are,” she notes, “increasingly exercising a parallel authority alongside governments in matters of economic management affecting the location of industry and investment, the direction of technological innovation, the management of labour relations, and the fiscal extraction of surplus value” (Strange 1996, 65).

Finally, even in the late 1970’s, Bull could write of the “technological unification of the world.” In medieval Europe, Christianity served as a unifying force for people. In a secular neomedievalism, Bull opines, perhaps technology could serve to provide a similar unifying role. He observes that “[i]t is sometimes contended that the demise of the states system is taking place as a consequence of the technological unification of the world . . . which is bound to lead to the politics of ‘spaceship earth’ or of the ‘global village’ in which the states system is only a part” (Bull 2002, 236). Without doubt, the Internet and social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been able to link people in disparate parts of the world together. They have also been able to allow people to gain access to information in ways that the state can regulate only with great difficulty and at the risk of international condemnation. While it cannot yet be claimed that technology has brought about a “global village,” it seems certain that at the very least the technological revolution has challenged the ability of states to maintain control in the same ways they had in the past. And undoubtedly, the information gained by citizens has in some cases contributed to the delegitimization of some of the traditional instruments of state power.

If we accept the proposition that the international system is becoming something akin to what Bull called neomedieval, what does this mean for human dignity? At some level, it would mean that the traditional system of accountability is being loosed from its moorings. In a system where states have legal and moral legitimacy because they are to be accountable to their citizens, intergovernmental organizations have legitimacy because they are creations of states. In other words, the legitimacy of IGOs is derivative of that of states. But when we suddenly fast forward to a world where states are losing some of their monopoly of legitimacy through the presence of powerful non-state, non-state-created, actors, it becomes a challenge to find such accountability. While the international system is populated with nearly 200 states, alongside these states is a wide variety of dissimilar international actors that make claims for political power and vie for the authority over and loyalty of individuals. In medieval Europe, despite the many actors and overlapping authorities, there was a vital, unifying force: Christianity. Prior to the destructive Thirty-Years War, the Christian religion was able to create a common belief system and shared identity for the kingdoms, principalities, and other actors that existed upon the Medieval stage.

In the neomedieval world of the twenty-first century, there is no common religion upon which the political order can rely. According to recent estimates (Central Intelligence Agency), approximately 33.39% of the world’s people are Christian, 22.74% Muslim, 13.8% Hindu, 6.7% Buddhist, 0.35% Sikh, 0.22% Jewish, 0.11 Baha’i, 10.95% other religions, and the remaining percentages non-religious or atheist. Clearly, the kind of religious unity that existed in the European Middle Ages does not remain. In the diverse and complex neomedieval world, the concept of human dignity can provide such a unifying force. Just as Christianity once served as the unifying force in the past, human dignity can play that role today.

It is suggestive that contemporary figures as diverse as Melinda Gates, Jack Welch, Aung San Suu Kyi, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the Dalai Lama, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have invoked the notion of human dignity. For example, in his first Inaugural Address as President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela said “We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity” (Mandela 1994). Similarly, the Aga Khan, the hereditary Iman of Ismaili Muslims and major philanthropist said in an address in 2006 in Evora, Portugal: “The search for justice and security, the struggle for equality of opportunity, the quest for tolerance and harmony, the pursuit of human dignity—these are moral imperatives which we must work towards and think about on a daily basis” (Khan 2006). Such different prominent thinkers recognize the centrality and vitality of human dignity as a touchstone for action.

But if human dignity is to provide the unifying philosophy for the twenty-first century, guiding the activities of global institutions, one must ask several questions: First, *what* would the ideational content of human dignity be in this context? Starting with a basic definition of human dignity offered below, how would this concept—as it is envisioned—need to be further developed as the unifying idea of the global system? Second, *how* would human dignity be able to come to play this unifying role? Third, *where* would this “dignitarian dialogue” take place? In other words, in what fora would this idea develop? Finally, *who* would be the agents that would work to promote this idea? Given the multiplicity of actors in the system, which of those actors would most appropriately work to promote human dignity? Each of these questions deserves to be taken up in turn.

WHAT: AN IDEA ANIMATING A DIALOGUE

The Idea

The goal this paper proposes is to construct a robust international consensus on human dignity. If this consensus can be achieved, and human dignity can become embedded as an element of the social structure of the international system, the human condition could improve greatly.

But before there can be further movement to create that consensus, we need a better understanding of the content of human dignity. As such, here is a working definition: *Human dignity is the fundamental **agency** of human beings to apply their gifts to thrive. As such, it requires **social recognition** of each person's inherent value and claim to equal access to opportunity. To be meaningful, human dignity must be **institutionalized in practice and governance**.*

Among other influences, this definition draws insights from Plato’s and Aristotle’s notions of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s notion of capabilities-based development, and Francis Fukuyama’s interpretation of the Ancients’ concept of *thymos* as recognition (Plato 1991; Aristotle 1999; Sen 1999; Nussbaum 1997; Nussbaum 2001; Fukuyama 1992). With no claim of comprehensiveness and stipulating substantive Western influences, an account of the strands of thought informing this working definition follows.

The Ancients

Among the Ancient philosophers, self-worth was a crucial notion. Plato observed in *The Republic* that a person only lived well when the three parts of his soul were properly in balance—the rational, appetitive, and spirited aspects. Spiritedness, or *thymos*, is associated with feeling valuable, not just insularly but relationally—valuable in the eyes of others in society. This element is fundamental to human dignity.

In addition to self-worth, potential plays a key role the thinking of ancient Western philosophers. Aristotle believed the ultimate end unique to human beings was the realization of human potential in the form of what he called *eudaimonia*—human flourishing. Foreshadowing a modern notion of responsibility necessarily accompanying freedom, this value is not a state of mind or thinking, but developed and exercised in ongoing activity. *Eudaimonia* involves developing character traits that fuse reason to virtue. This lofty conception of human potentiality is to be distinguished from that of Epicurus, who associated achievement of *eudaimonia* with maximizing hedonistic pleasures.

Judeo-Christian Thinking

The dignity and worth of humankind is a primary focus of the Judeo-Christian faith traditions. In these traditions, every human is made in the image of God. Genesis 1:26 holds that “And God said, Let us make man in our image.” This opening text from the Hebrew Scriptures goes on to say human beings were given dominion over all other creatures and resources—fish, fowl, cattle, the earth. Genesis 2:19-20 suggests, no less, that the Creator brought all beasts and fowl “unto Adam to see what he would call them” and he named them. An animal rights or environmental activist today might resist these notions at a literal level, but the implication that human beings all have a special status and role is central. George Kateb’s quite secular 2011 study, *Human Dignity*, adopts this “breed apart” formulation about human beings, based on their level of consciousness. Moreover, beyond naming other creatures, each human has a distinct name implying value. This idea echoes Aristotle’s view of the unique function and value of human beings.

The innate value of human life is, of course, embodied in one of the great Ten Commandments given to Moses: Thou shall not kill, or to provide a more literal translation of the Hebrew: You shall not murder. In the Torah, this commandment is established as a law: no human being has the standing to kill unjustifiably.

Within the Jewish tradition, human dignity is also affirmed in the injunctions to provide special care for those possessing special needs: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger (e.g., Deut 26:12; Zech 7:10, Jer 7:6). Isaiah, for example issues a strong condemnation to those who do not tend to the disenfranchised:

Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,
and the writers who keep writing oppression,
to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be their spoil,
and that they may make the fatherless their prey! (Isaiah 10: 1-2)

The Christian scriptures continue to affirm the belief in the innate value of the human person, perhaps best encapsulated in the Golden Rule. And much like the words of Isaiah, the Gospel affirms a vision of human dignity that requires active service to each individual, including those with special needs. In the parable of the Great Judgment, for example:

the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' (Matthew 25: 34-36)

Such thinking has reemerged often over the centuries and in contemporary religious guidance, such as Pope John Paul II's August 6, 1993 *Encyclical* on human dignity (Pope John Paul II 1993).

Kantian Idealism

A different tradition, that of modern German idealism, also places special emphasis on human worth. Immanuel Kant justifies the claim that humans have intrinsic dignity by pointing to the fact that humans are agents: they must choose their own actions and give themselves goals. Humans, therefore, are not just beings with value, but also the sort of beings that create or construct value to begin with. It is their capacity to give things value that entails that they are, more precisely, "above all value." Kant's admonition to never treat another human being as a mere means is based on the equal value of all human beings. Kant argues that humans only act freely (and actually live a life of dignity) when they act upon a law that they give themselves. The law that persons must give themselves to be free must take a form such that it applies to everyone, no matter who the person is or what the person desires. This categorical imperative of acting as if an action could be generalized into a universal principle implies that other people and their worth must be treated with consistency rather than capriciously. No one can make an exception of themselves, including autocrats.

Post-War Secular Universalism

Kant's *Perpetual Peace* calls for universal law inspired the League of Nations, as well as the ideals, institutions, and laws that it founded. After World War II, the world took another run at forming a global organization to sustain peace. The UN Charter invokes "the dignity and worth of the human person" within its first 45 words. Peace could not be detached from respect for dignity. When, in its infancy, the UN set about elaborating norms on human rights by drafting the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, extensive efforts were taken by the founding member states of the UN to establish a common basis for the document. Harvard Law School scholar Mary Ann Glendon notes in her treatment of Eleanor Roosevelt's role in shaping the UDHR, *A World Made New*, that,

Where basic human values are concerned, cultural diversity has been exaggerated. The group [of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization philosophers] found, after consulting Confucian, Hindu, Muslim, and European thinkers, that a core of fundamental principles was widely shared in countries that had not yet adopted rights instruments and in cultures that had not embraced the language of rights... The

philosophers concluded that even people who seem to be far apart in theory can agree that certain things are so terrible in practice that no one will publicly approve them and that certain things are so good in practice that no one will publicly oppose them (Glendon 2001, 222).

Dignity was not the *result* of rights but an *a priori* imperative that undergirds the rights, themselves. Following some objections about the language of dignity, Glendon observes:

Mrs. Roosevelt, when her turn came, said that the word dignity had been considered carefully by the Human Rights Commission, which had included it in order to emphasize that every human being is worthy of respect. In the scheme of the Declaration, Article 1 did not refer to specific rights because it was meant to explain why human beings have rights to begin with (Glendon 2001, 146).

Glendon observes that the UDHR “was far more influenced by the modern dignitarian rights tradition of continental Europe and Latin America than by the more individualistic documents of Anglo-American lineage” (Glendon 2001, 227). Hence, Eleanor Roosevelt forged a meeting of the minds with other delegates by implanting into the UDHR all of the “Four Freedoms” her husband had hailed (*of* expression and worship, and *from* want and fear)—bridging political and economic rights.

The New Haven School

Soon thereafter, one sees the concept of dignity emerge in a rich—if now underappreciated—intersection of the law and social science. Yale University’s Myres McDougal and his intellectual partner Harold Lasswell shaped a jurisprudential framework, sometimes referred to as “the New Haven School.” (See Reisman et al., 2007.) It offered analytical tools drawn from the social sciences aimed at strengthening a world order rooted in human dignity. McDougal and Lasswell identify a transcendent consensus as the justification for dignity’s centrality: “All systems proclaim the dignity of the human individual and the ideal of a worldwide public order in which this ideal is authoritatively pursued and effectively approximated” (McDougal 1959, 24).

They define human dignity as: “a social process in which values are widely and not narrowly shared, and in which private choice, rather than coercion, is emphasized as the predominant modality of power” (McDougal 1959, 19). While some serious thinkers and practitioners claim otherwise (Tipson 1973; Riesman 2007), this definition may not be tangible enough to an individual human beings’ needs to be of great operational use to contemporary institutions and this project. However, regarding the values to which it refers—harking back to the Aristotelian value in facilitating people’s potential—the school identifies eight value categories human beings seek: power, enlightenment, wealth, well-being, skill, affection, respect, and rectitude. A world order favoring human dignity facilitates the individual pursuit of these values through choice. The school’s real significance was as a major post-World War jurisprudential approach for international governance and institutions explicitly fashioned to normatively advance dignity. As a result, this school made the intellectual move to find that the ultimate touchstone of international law not in the claims of states enjoying sovereignty, but rather of the individual person.

Capabilities-Based Development

Contemporary thinkers about human development have picked up on the ancients' concept of tapped potential and thriving, and echoed the New Haven School's focus on catalyzing people's ability to freely pursue values of choice. As the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator Helen Clark of New Zealand observed on March 9, 2010:

[T]he human development paradigm championed by UNDP for two decades [is] very much inspired by India's Nobel Laureate, Professor Amartya Sen. Human development is about placing people at the centre of development, enlarging their capabilities, and expanding their opportunities and freedom to lead lives which they value (Clark 2010).

Sen helped fashion the Human Development Index for UNDP's first *Human Development Report* in 1990 with the late economist Mahbub ul Haq, the series founder. He and American scholar Martha Nussbaum have elaborated on an approach to development based on enabling the capabilities of individual human beings. Nussbaum identifies ten crucial capabilities: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses (imagination, thought), emotions, practical reason, affiliation (community, association, social basis of self-respect), other species, play, and control over one's environment (political participation, personal property). In *Women and Human Development*, she argues that each of these capabilities is needed in order for a human life to be "not so impoverished that it is not worthy of the dignity of a human being" (Nussbaum 2001, 72).

The Fukuyaman Synthesis

One of the more provocative broad-gauged social science thinkers in the United States, Francis Fukuyama, offers some crucial insights on dignity applicable to institutions. He is known for having broken with neoconservatives over the invasion of Iraq, contradicting their own professed skepticism about social engineering, and especially for his earlier exploration whether the passing of the Cold War presaged an "end of history." On the latter, more have fixed upon his 1989 *National Interest* article than his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*. *Thymos* serves as the engine of his vision of history steadily driving toward the elaboration of human freedom and democracy. Fukuyama writes, "*Thymos* is something like an innate human sense of justice: people believe that they have a certain worth, and when other people act as though they are worth less—when they do not recognize their worth at its correct value—then they become angry" (Fukuyama 1992, 165).

Yet even more than the Ancients, he draws from the thinking of another German idealist, Hegel, for whom "the primary motor of human history is not modern natural science or the ever expanding horizon of desire that powers it, but rather a totally non-economic drive, the *struggle for recognition*" (Fukuyama 1992, 135). Fukuyama applies this idealist–vice materialist–view of dignity to modern struggles from that of Vaclav Havel to Americans for racial equality, writing:

The indignity of racism in modern America lies only partly in the physical deprivation brought on by poverty among blacks: a black is (in Ralph Ellison's phrase) an "invisible man," not actively hated but unseen as a fellow human being... Virtually the entire civil liberties and civil rights agendas, while having certain economic components, are essentially thymotic contests over recognition of competing understandings of justice and human dignity (Fukuyama 1992, 176).

In short, Fukuyama observes, “[t]he ‘struggle for recognition’ is evident everywhere around us” (Fukuyama 1992, 145).

His interpretation of Hegel pinpoints a human being’s “own sense of self-worth is intimately connected with the value that other people place on him” (Fukuyama 1992, 146). Dignity is hence something necessarily established within a community or a social context. While Fukuyama has an uncommon interpretation of Hegel drawn from Alexander Kojeve, this socially-grounded basis for human thriving represents a tradition running from ancient thought to the birth of modern international law. Grotius writes, for instance, “among the traits characteristic of man is an impelling desire for society, that is, for the social life—not of any and every sort, but peaceful, and organized according to the measure of his intelligence, with those who are of his own kind; this social trend the Stoics called ‘sociableness’” (Grotius 1957).

Dignity’s Relationship to Human Rights

Michael Ignatieff asserts that human rights have become the *lingua franca* of contemporary global politics (Ignatieff 2011, 53). So, why focus on human dignity instead to inform the work of diverse global institutions in a neomedieval world? And what exactly is the relationship between *human dignity* and *human rights*? A public health specialist who has worked for UNAIDS, the World Bank, and now the International Labor Organization, Rosalia Rodriguez-Garcia, in writing about policies overcoming social stigmas of AIDS-vulnerable groups (e.g., sex workers, males sexually active with other males, or intravenous narcotics users) observes that: “rights spring from inherent dignity at the macro level, while at the micro level, especially when human dignity has been suppressed or attacked, the application of human rights would aim at restoring dignity” (Rodriguez-Garcia, 6). In short, the relationship between dignity and rights is twofold. First, as noted earlier, human dignity serves as the premise behind human rights. It is a larger, foundational concept: that all human beings equally have inherent worth. But second, at the practical level, human dignity is the product of human rights. That is, if human rights are to have meaning beyond norm elaboration in resolutions, treaties, and law, and are to be enjoyed in practice, the test of impact is whether they yield the agency and social recognition which constitute human dignity.

It is in arguing that human dignity, rather than human rights, should be the idea shaping the mission of the global institutions that the first of two major potential critiques of this paper arises. Some might argue that by embracing human dignity one is distancing the work of global institutions from human rights, and abandoning hard-fought achievements to embed human rights in international law and institutional practice. Human rights are indisputably crucial. A project to construct an international system that is dignity-centered is an exercise in building upon the concept of human rights, not jettisoning it. Indeed, human dignity helps transcend the misplaced segregation and prioritization between political-civil and socio-economic rights respectively. Property and land rights protecting the global poor’s means of subsistence,³ nondiscrimination and access to antiretroviral drugs for the populations vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, or social protections for human trafficking victims before or after being identified, are all cases where political-civil and socio-economic access to justice is intermingled. Human dignity helps conceptually justify dealing with both “types” of rights holistically.

Moreover, implementation of the contemporary human rights framework has fallen far short of norm promulgation on the national, regional, and global levels as a function of lacking

institutional capacity and will (Council on Foreign Relations 2013). *Human dignity* offers a philosophical basis for broader consensus for action—to take implementation farther.

Dimensions of a Dignitarian Dialogue

To build a consensus on human dignity, there must be a normative and political dialogue on a global level. What such a “dignitarian dialogue” entails involves three dimensions.

One dimension relates to first principles. At the outset, open discourse is needed concerning whether there is a common teleology of human dignity that crosses the divide between cultures, between faiths, and between faith-inspired and secular thought. The essence of human dignity is reflected in the sacred texts of the great religions all over the world (Banchhoff, 2014). Moreover, some scholars have observed that societies with a majority population practicing one faith tradition surprisingly often welcome faith-based nongovernmental organizations of another faith conducting programmatic work to help the disadvantaged (Bibbins Sedaca 2014, 10-11; Thomas, 2010, 98). This observation, while deserving deeper empirical verification, is encouraging regarding that potential for consensus between faiths and cultures on first principles.

A second dimension deals with operationalizing dignity—on how to better turn norms into action. It appears that human rights norms have stalled in their implementation, whether to shrink atrocities, unfetter political dissent, or economically empower the impoverished (Council on Foreign Relations 2013). The dialogue must focus on how to build on the achievements of human rights by taking advantage of the mobilizational power of human dignity as an idea (Banchhoff 2014). After all, the aim of dialogue is not dignity asserted, but dignity realized via operational impact.

The third dimension of dialogue would address how to prioritize goals in implementation efforts. In particular, are there any tensions and tradeoffs between *agency* and *social recognition* as two major aspects of dignity in practice? Is there a priority of sequencing where recognition must precede agency, or vice versa? Take, for instance, the efforts by states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and even business alliances as institutions to combat human trafficking (Lagon 2011). Victim protection for survivors of human trafficking involves tradeoffs pertaining to realization of dignity. Should a humanitarian visa from a national government regularizing a victim’s status as an undocumented migrant or eligibility for state-supported medical and social services be conditioned upon cooperation with law enforcement as a witness against their trafficker? Such conditionality favors social recognition (again, prosecuting the victim’s tormenter) over agency (freedom to avert deportation or to consider if repatriation is desirable). And even regarding social recognition in and of itself, such conditionality favors one form (affirming victims’ worth by vigorously pursuing prosecution of their trafficker) over another (being treated as worthy of access to state-supported care).⁴

There are numerous other questions of priorities in implementation, which a dignitarian dialogue might fruitfully address. For example, if human dignity has potential to bridge the areas of political-civil and the socio-economic empowerment, what questions of sequencing or balancing still remain? Or for the degrading atrocities, human trafficking, poverty, or pandemic disease of concern to a variety of practitioners, should *remediation* for those whose dignity has already been robbed take precedence over *prevention* of others being robbed of it? Or, while measuring the

impact of global institutions' programs based on sound metrics would help show which enhance dignity most, what percentage of finite funding should be diverted from directly benefitting beneficiaries, as it were, into conducting assessments of how much they are benefitting?

In short, what a “dignitarian dialogue” must address is strategies and tangible priorities for implementation in addition to first principles.

HOW: DIALOGUE BY DIALECTIC AND INCORPORATION

If the goal is to encourage a dignitarian dialogue, what exactly is meant by the term “dialogue” in this context? In the international relations literature on constructivism, there is much discussion of “norm entrepreneurs,” a term legal scholar Cass Sunstein helped bring into prominence (Sunstein, 1996). A norm entrepreneur would be an actor—state, intergovernmental institution, nongovernmental institution, individual, or other participant—who seeks to promote a given norm with a view toward gaining its acceptance and ultimate implementation in the international community. So, for example, Canada as a state, its then foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy, and the International Coalition to Ban Landmines might all be understood as entrepreneurs that played a critical role in international efforts to establish a norm against the use of landmines, and the codification of the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction (Dolan and Hunt 1998). There are critical roles to be played by a variety of norm entrepreneurs in advancing the concept of human dignity. For example, the UN Secretary General has served an entrepreneurial role in promoting norms such as the “Responsibility to Protect” in situations of humanitarian atrocities (Williams 2014).

Regarding human dignity, we want to be clear at the outset that our goal is not simply to gain acceptance of a concept that is static and set in stone. Rather our goal is to promote a dialogue on human dignity. An example of how this dialogue can work can be illustrated by the development of international human rights law. Following the adoption of the United Nations Charter, one of the first tasks of the new global organization was to develop an “international bill of rights.” In the debates that produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent treaties on human rights, there was a clash of definitions. Western states, led by the United States, emphasized civil and political rights as “true” human rights, while the Soviet Union and its allies focused on economic, social, and cultural rights. As the debate continued in subsequent decades—even while still in a Cold War context of suspicion of Soviet-aligned states conveniently seeking to deprioritize political freedom—it led the United States to a greater appreciation of economic, social and cultural rights. Indeed, in his Law Day speech of April 30, 1977, US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was clear in acknowledging the “right to the fulfillment of such vital needs as food, shelter, health care and education” (Vance 1977). And, although it took a bit longer, the former Eastern-bloc states came to recognize, even if imperfectly, the importance of civil and political rights. This was a dialogue. There was both mutual exchange and mutual learning.

This kind of discourse hopefully will modify, improve, and ultimately construct an even better, more workable definition of human dignity than proposed here. In a constructive dialectical tension, contending ideas can be accommodated and incorporated.

WHERE: REAL AND VIRTUAL VENUES FOR DIALOGUE

But if there is to be a dignitarian dialogue, where is it to take place? Some of the great foundational documents of global politics have been produced at grand international conferences—the Paris Peace Conference that produced the League of Nations Covenant or the San Francisco Conference that produced the United Nations Charter. It might seem that there should be a similar convening to conduct the dialogue on human dignity. But even the San Francisco Conference was preceded by years of negotiations that took place among the Allies during the Second World War. In the current neomedieval system, it is unlikely that there should be a literal “San Francisco Moment” for human dignity. First, it is impossible to bring all the constitutive actors together in one place at one moment in time. Second, a true dialogue on human dignity requires time and non-adversarial deliberation.

So where will the dialogue take place? The answer is complex. Undoubtedly, there will be multilateral settings, where the representatives of states come together—such as the United Nations, regional organizations, and the like. Similarly, nongovernment organizations and universities will sponsor panels, conferences, and other events where dialogue can take place. But much of the dialogue will take place in the messy, day-to-day world that is global politics. In other words, the dialogue will take place as actors struggle to realize human dignity in practice—when IGOs, NGOs and states respond to a humanitarian crisis, when groups from the private sector address supply chain issues to prevent human exploitation, and when faith-based organizations band together to affirm people’s freedom of worship or freedom from hunger. What is required is that the notion of human dignity figures in these interactions as these diverse groups struggle with real problems in the international system.

And, of course, it is important to note that in a world with unprecedented connectivity, the Internet will be an online venue for the dialogue. The electronic medium will allow all actors—including individuals—to discuss, debate, and advance human dignity. It will also provide a forum where the day-to-day challenges to human dignity can be brought to the attention of institutions in ways heretofore impossible (Jorgensen, 2013). During the so-called “Arab Spring,” for example, the use of social media—Twitter, in particular—was able to make the world aware of events that would have previously gone unnoticed (Ghonim, 2012).

WHO: THE U.S. AND GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS

The Remaining Importance of the United States

In socially constructing a consensus on human dignity to be embedded in the international system, the role of the United States deserves attention (Wendt, 1992). In this post-hegemonic world, acute American unipolarity has passed. Yet the United States has a crucial catalytic role to play, arguably more important than any other single state, or even the European Union as an amalgam of states. Among states, if not the United States, then who?

On the one hand, the United States must not and cannot be a power attempting to force-feed human dignity as an idea down the throats of the world.⁵ That would neither be desirable nor feasible. On the other hand, the U.S. must not act as timid bystander for fear of tainting a dialogue about human dignity. It can and should back the idea enthusiastically, if not dogmatically, in a dialectical dialogue.

John Ikenberry of Princeton University suggests that the liberal norms and institutions the U.S. applied its hegemony to build in the 20th century can persist in the 21st century now that that hegemony has passed (Ikenberry 2011). Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—as well as South Korea, Turkey, and Indonesia for that matter—do not today seem poised to act as singular or collective guarantors of liberal norms. Some do not even seem that inclined to share burdens of leadership (Kupchan 2012). Skepticism is merited about how Ikenberry’s vision will transpire in a neomedieval world without two revisions to it. First, the liberal norms that the United States helped institutionalize need to be broadened to incorporate a human dignity consensus.⁶ Second, vital to that first refinement, the United States will need to be more important than Ikenberry acknowledges.

In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright asserted that the United States was the “indispensable nation.” Varied observers who identify or even hail the passing of U.S. hegemony, from Chalmers Johnson to Andrew Bacevich, reject this characterization (Johnson 2007; Bacevich 2008). Yet in constructing a dignity-centered order, Clinton and Albright were, and are still, right. With that said, the United States needs to take on a new kind of leadership role. That role is neither boldly gathering a posse as sheriff, nor quietly leading from behind. It is not didactic teacher, preacher, or scold on the one hand, nor solely the exemplar of rectitude at home on the other (however much getting its economic and political house in order is desperately needed).

Perhaps the best analogy for the indispensable leadership role of the United States in constructing a dignity-centered international order is that of cultivator. The United States cannot be the overzealous planter of the seeds of a dignitarian dialogue nor overzealous reaper of its fruits (lest it be seen as seeking zero-sum rather than a shared positive-sum gain). But it can and must cultivate needed dialogue on first principles, on modalities for operationalizing dignity, and on priorities of implementation. The dialogue will be a lot less likely to bear fruit if the United States fails to judiciously but assiduously cultivate it.

And here lies in waiting the second of two major potential critiques of this essay’s argument. Some might say that a dialogue about human dignity just represents a Trojan Horse for sustaining U.S. power. Put differently, it might just be pouring the old wine of liberal norms into a new bottle labeled “dignity.” But dignity is not a vehicle to perpetuate American exceptionalism—neither in its positive sense of a special role to extend freedom nor its negative connotation of rejecting scrutiny by the international system. Dignity is not a vehicle for American hegemony redux. It could not succeed as such, nor should it.

Yet constructing a dialogue and then an order based on the dignity idea would benefit from and justify self-conscious U.S. efforts as a key catalyst. Global institutions will be more likely to embrace and indeed apply the idea with those efforts. Conversely, this dignitarian project offers desperately needed cues for what refashioned role the United States should play in the 21st century, characterized as much or more by diplomatic and intersocietal dialogue as by its vast capacity to project military power, extend the reach of globalization, and technologically innovate.

Global Institutions

If a dignitarian dialogue succeeds, then dignity as a central aim can be *institutionalized in practice and governance*. In a neomedieval world, there are two types of global institutions, which would advance that practice and governance. First, there are “traditional” institutions. This category includes states and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the International Criminal Court, and a variety of regional organizations. As noted above, some of these institutions—like the UN and regional organizations—can often provide a forum for other actors to engage in a dialogue, but these institutions are also actors in and of themselves and can work in such a way as to promote human dignity.

Second, there is what might be called “emerging institutions” or “partnerships.” These include such entities as the Global Fund, a variety of faith-based institutions, and private sector actors, like Yahoo! or Google. These actors offer great potential in the human dignity dialogue in part because they are not traditional actors in the field. The Global Fund, for example, can address a very specific challenge to human dignity and advance a broader understanding of dignity and its connection to health and welfare of all persons. Similarly, a private sector actor, such as Yahoo!, can make things happen more quickly than states or traditional intergovernmental organizations that have entrenched bureaucracies and structures that can make slow down policy-making and agenda-setting. The emergence of such hybrids, partnerships, and non-public institutions is not merely a symptom of a more complicated and less accountable landscape of global institutions in a neomedieval world; it offers vital new agents with potential to promote human dignity.

HOPE FOR A NEOMEDIEVAL WORLD: KANT RECONSIDERED

To sum up, a neomedieval world is an era where states are no longer the only game in town. In that context, the idea of human dignity offers both the inspiration and an implementation yardstick for global institutions. In particular, focusing intentionally on the twin pillars of *agency* and *recognition* for all people—equally deserving of justice and opportunity—make it possible to operationalize and realize the notion of dignity.

Global institutions are essential vehicles for building a consensus about dignity and then for implementing it. Intergovernmental institutions like the UN Security Council, the International Criminal Court, the UN Secretary General, the World Bank, and the IMF retain important roles, not least if their work is reoriented to focus even more on dignity. New partnerships and hybrid institutions add flexible, nimble, and inclusive means to address dignity on the ground. One example is the Kiva development partnership using crowdsourcing to get microloans to deserving entrepreneurs. (Hartley, 2010) Another would be the partnerships to fight forced labor and human trafficking in Brazil bringing together government, international organizations, NGOs, and even businesses like Ford Motor Company—which found supply chains for steel tainted by gross exploitation (Ford Motor Company. 2010/2011; Lagon 2011, 96).

Taken together, these two kinds of global institutions can help make a neomedieval world more peaceful, prosperous and pluralistic than chaotic. Based on a human dignity consensus, a mosaic of global institutions can help tame globalization’s hard edges. A dignity-centered mission for global institutions helps offer useful meaning to the expression “global governance,”

which is, alas, as vaguely defined to date as it is ubiquitously invoked by scholars and policy specialists.

The thinking of Immanuel Kant, refashioned in a few respects, helps define the way forward. First, Kant's stressed the basic dignity of every human being—equal in their inherent worth. The implication of that emphasis was that human beings must not be treated as mere means; their value entitles them to be treated as ends in themselves. Second, Kant's work focused on institutional arrangements favorable to peace. Those arrangements lay both at the domestic level and the international level. In his view, liberal institutions were the most promising foundation of durable peace.

Juxtaposing these two legacies of Kantian thought, one can reimagine his vision to apply to the 21st century. His legacy regarding institutional arrangements favorable to peace not only influenced creation of the League of Nations and United Nations as intergovernmental institutions, but the idea of a “democratic peace.” As no one has explored more subtly than Michael Doyle, Kant posited that institutionalizing democracies will advance the aim of a “perpetual peace” (Doyle 1983; Doyle 1986). The contemporary policy implication is that the international community should actively promote democracy. And even an organization made up of democracies and nondemocracies as members of equal standing, the United Nations, has embraced that aim from post-conflict peace operations, to electoral capacity-building, to a UN Democracy Fund. (Newman and Rich 2004; Council on Foreign Relations 2013)

If democracy is defined to encompass pluralism, access to justice, tolerance, minority rights, and educational opportunity, in addition to elections, then the spread of democracy is significant to peace and prosperity. But perhaps juxtaposing Kant's two legacies of individual dignity and institutions favorable to harmony of humankind suggests that even more than a “democratic peace,” what is needed is a “dignitarian peace.”

Building a concept of dignity here which in part draws from the thinking of Francis Fukuyama (1992) in *The End of History and the Last Man* about the Ancient concept of *thymos* and the need for social recognition does not imply a claim of an imminent or distant inevitable end of history once the idea of dignity takes hold, following dialectic struggles between contending ideas. Dignity may not be the last or lasting idea of consequence. Nor might a “dignitarian peace” be perpetual and perfect.

Nonetheless, the best hope for the 21st century as an epoch is not solely a great power shaping the order, or democratization, or a particular religion, or technology and networked connectedness (Slaughter 2009). It is the idea of human dignity. This paper offers initial roadmap of a process of constructing a dignitarian order. That process would first construct and refine consensus on dignity—incorporating insights from challenges raised in an intercultural dialogue, in part within a mosaic of global institutions. Then, it would involve constructing new and redirecting existing global institutions to make human dignity not an aspiration but an enjoyed reality. Then global institutions can serve as the primary means to make sure that human beings are treated as more than means, and as the justly recognized agents of their own prosperity.

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⁴ Thanks go to Director of Communications and Policy Outreach for AidData, Samantha Custer, for her insights about the tensions between agency and social recognition in implementation, and thoughts how it applies in the case of human trafficking.

⁵ The uncomfortable allusion to Guantanamo hunger strikes is intended.

⁶ Ikenberry and co-author Daniel Deudney emphasize the importance of John Dewey and FDR's New Deal as inspirations for the U.S. applying its hegemony to institutionalize liberal norms globally after World War II. They argue for engaging rising developing world powers in burdensharing to sustain liberal norms. Some of their thinking about FDR's thinking economic thinking (the fear from fear and from want among his Four Freedoms) is consonant with developing consensus on a widened concept of human dignity, to include socio-economic and not just political-civil rights. See Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry and "Democratic Internationalism: An American Grand Strategy for a Post-exceptionalist Era," *International Institutions and Global Governance Working Paper*, Council on Foreign Relations, November 2012. Accessed October 1, 2013 at <http://www.cfr.org/grand-strategy/democratic-internationalism-american-grand-strategy-post-exceptionalist-era/p29417>.