


<https://doi.org/10.18778/0208-6069.113.02>



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RE-MEMBERING PLURALITY AND RELATIONALITY IN HUMAN RIGHTS' DIGNITY A PEACE STUDIES APPROACH TO PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA'S *DE HOMINIS DIGNITATE*

Abstract. The concept of 'dignity' at the base of Human Rights has been criticized, paradoxically, for a humiliating treatment of the 'Other' that disregards, for example, the embeddedness of individuals within communities. In response, I argue for considering dignity as a plural and relational concept, introducing contemporary peace and conflict research into legal philosophy.

Besides the established approaches linked usually to values like 'justice', 'security' and 'freedom', this article addresses a 'concordial' perspective that needs to be recovered and put in relation to prevailing discourses on 'dignity'. This 'concordial' dignity, as I show, is oriented by different guiding principles like community, non-duality, processuality, systemic embeddedness, dynamic balance, harmony and fertility.

While these principles have been often connected to so-called indigenous or 'Eastern' philosophies, these are central (and neglected) elements also at the core of 'Western' philosophy. Exemplarily, I inquire a key historical source for the concept of dignity in contemporary human rights philosophy: Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio on the Dignity of Man*.

Keywords: dignity, community, peace, Renaissance

PLURALISTYCZNE I RELACYJNE UJĘCIE GODNOŚCI W PRAWACH CZŁOWIEKA. PERSPEKTYWA STUDIÓW NAD POKOJEM W ODNIESIENIU DO *DE HOMINIS DIGNITATE* PICA DELLA MIRANDOLI

Streszczenie. Pojęcie godności leżącej u podstawy praw człowieka było krytykowane – paradoksalnie – za poniżające traktowanie „Innego”, czy też jako pomijające zakorzenienie jednostki we wspólnocie. W odpowiedzi na tę krytykę niniejszy artykuł proponuje postrzeganie godności jako pojęcia pluralistycznego i relacyjnego, wprowadzając współczesne badania nad pokojem i konfliktem do filozofii prawa.

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Obok ujęć o ugruntowanej pozycji, zwykle powiązanych z wartościami takimi jak sprawiedliwość, bezpieczeństwo i wolność, artykuł podejmuje perspektywę „konkordialną”, którą należy odzyskać i powiązać z dominującymi dyskursami dotyczącymi „godności”. Pokazuje, że ta „konkordialna” godność orientuje się według odmiennych zasad przewodnich, takich jak wspólnota, niedualność, procesualność, systemowe zakorzenienie, dynamiczna równowaga, harmonia oraz twórczość.

Choć zasady te bywają często łączone z tzw. „rdzennymi” lub „wschodnimi” filozofiami, stanowią one również centralne, choć zaniedbane, elementy tradycji filozofii zachodniej. Jako przykład, artykuł analizuje kluczowe historyczne źródło współczesnego rozumienia godności w filozofii praw człowieka, traktat *O godności człowieka* Pica della Mirandoli.

Słowa kluczowe: godność, wspólnota, pokój, Renesans

1. INTRODUCTION

Having started its formal career in positive legal documents in 1948 with the UN Declaration on Human Rights as a response to World War II, the concept of dignity builds today a cornerstone of legal structures and argumentation. The UNDHR acknowledges human dignity as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace already in its Preamble and Art. 1.¹ However, the increasing violence and injustice experienced since its enactment at a global level have put in question the meaning and validity of this grounding concept.

In fact, despite its centrality to the legal argumentative architecture, the concept of dignity has been criticized from the very moment of its legal insertion in 1948. It is the understanding of a (generalized) rational individual which has been put in question by, amongst others, postmodern philosophers, pointing out that this view does not acknowledge difference, relationality and situatedness of the experience of being human in its complexity. Exemplary critiques arose from the fields of anthropology and feminist thought along with socio-political demands of recognition, more specifically of recognition of dignified ‘Others’ to the modern subject (Engle 2001; Carosio 2007). Paradoxically, the representatives trying to develop a tool to protect the dignity of all humanity in the context after World War II, were criticized exactly with the argument that they were by the same token treating the ‘Other’ with indignity.

Considering these legitimate concerns, I argue that we are dealing with a historically and philosophically mutilated understanding of the term, and consequently with a mutilated academic dialogue about it. Importantly, as with any discourse, this limiting approach pervades not only the explicit aspects of contemporary discussion, but also the interpretation of the sources that are used to (philosophically and politically) legitimise contemporary concepts, making some discussions on dignity possible or not; some research methods valuable and others not. I explore here exemplarily a paradigmatic source for Western

¹ This principle was restated at the Vienna Conference (1993). The first legal document with an explicit mention of ‘dignity’ is the Irish constitution of 1937 (Masferrer 2017).

understandings of 'dignity' as a humanistic triumph: Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio on the Dignity of Man* (1486).

While it is not enough either to acknowledge the limitations of this conceptualization, I propose here to explore how a revised view on dignity can offer us a more relational, integrative and useful perspective. While there is a vast literature on the issue of dignity in legal philosophy, due to the space limitations of this article, I focus here on those aspects of dignity that are less explored and are linked specifically with diversity and relationality.² As a reference point to explore these facets of dignity, I will resort to the contemporary revision of another, more researched keyword of Human Rights: peace.

2. DIGNITY: FOUNDATION OF PEACES?

The critique posed to dignity regarding the undignified treatment of the 'Other' does not stand alone in the frame of the postmodern revision of Human Rights. Amongst many other concepts and categories, also the very concept of law has been inquired. As a result, diverse approaches have advanced pluralizing understandings of law. Be it in line with legal anthropological and sociological research under the title of 'Legal Pluralism' (Swenson 2018), or, from the side of philosophy and cultural studies, as a result of the deconstruction of 'Law' (Derrida 1992), the field of law has experienced a groundbreaking convulsion. Categories related to the field like 'justice', 'security' and 'freedom' have been equally destabilized, opening the terrain of Human Rights for new exploration paths. To use an image, a rather 'dignified' picture of Lady Justice presiding the reign of Law has burst into a million of pieces of a mosaic we are still trying to figure out.

Like 'dignity', also the concept of 'peace', another cornerstone of Human Rights, has 'suffered' a loss in legitimacy, becoming as much void of meaning as dreadfully necessary. As a consequence, new proposals emerged in the last several decades. Based on Muñoz' concept of *imperfect peace* and Galtung's differentiations of positive and negative peace³ (Muñoz 2001; Galtung 1969), a key line of Peace and Conflict Research has explored socio-linguistic, cultural and historical variations of understandings of peace, leading to the Theory of Many Peaces (Dietrich 2008). The findings allowed to differentiate 'families'

² For an account on contemporary approaches see Rupniewski (2023).

³ With this differentiation, Galtung emphasized the importance of envisaging peace, beyond the avoidance of war, as a positive concept that includes human well-being in different facets. Later he differentiated types of violence (direct, structural, cultural) that can be linked to diverse understandings of peace.

of peace-approaches gravitating around certain key-principles that I summarize below.⁴ I propose to use this advanced differentiation amongst different approaches to peace to explore the diversity existing within ‘dignity’.

It will not surprise that one approach to peace is tied to justice. In this line, peace depends on the realization of certain values (‘moral’ peaces). It is just to protect pre-defined values, and when this happens, peace is established. However, as much as we advocate for the importance of justice in the world, it is important to recognize that, hand-in-hand with this understanding goes the assumption that war can still be legitimized if it responds to the pursue of justice. To put it bluntly, there are some wars that do count as peace; they are conceived as necessary for peace. In this line, we find the concepts of ‘just war’ as much as the brutal Conquest of the Americas in the name of the betterment of Humanity. Sadly, reiterations of this type of argument have been found in contemporary approaches to ‘Development’.⁵

A different, even if related, approach to peace, is based on the primacy of the pair ‘security-freedom’. It responds to questions like: Which institutions and structures can secure peace? Which mechanisms do we need to engineer? To what extent can an individual’s freedom be constrained in order to secure another’s person freedom, and thus social peace? Following an appeal to reason, concrete subjects subordinate their individual freedom to structures, e.g. the modern state, which will manage their freedom-security for their own benefit. Modern state law is a paradigmatic example of this promise. The notion of states as actors, carried by rational citizens, aiming for security, dedicated to (and dependent of) technical progress and free commerce, is at the base of the prevalent notion of international relations and (classical) international law.⁶ The Westphalian Peace (1648) carries this paradigm exemplarily and the United Nations Charter inherited the same logic.

The emergence of the Human Rights discourse in the 20th century is, for example, directly linked to the concept of the Four Freedoms, elaborated by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the “Four Freedoms State of the Union address” (1941).⁷ They became part of the personal mission undertaken by Eleanor Roosevelt in

⁴ Dietrich’s exploration is profound and vast and links to various other scholars like Adam Curle and John Paul Lederach. I refer here only to some key aspects that frame the current paper. For a better understanding, I have chosen to address the principles connected to the ‘peace families’ rather than the names Dietrich uses for his categories: ‘energetic’, ‘moral’, ‘modern’, ‘postmodern’, and an integrative ‘family of transrational peaces’.

⁵ Just to name a few paradigmatically critical voices, see: Sachs (2010); Esteva (1995); Kothari et al. (2019).

⁶ For a more detailed account, see: Dietrich (1998, 200 ff., 206 f., 212ff.).

⁷ They encompass: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear (Hennessey, Knutson 1999, 95).

1948, who decisively influenced the UNDHR, resulting in their inclusion into its preamble.⁸ In turn, they nurtured the development discourse that would launch 'modern development' (and with it modern law) as an export commodity (Dietrich 2011, 312 ff.; Esteva 2006)

In line with postmodern critique, a third approach to peace, underlines the relevance of recognizing the validity of diverse subjective truths.⁹ Therefore, speaking of 'peace' depends upon the particular perceptions and experiences of the individuals involved. Peace becomes a matter of negotiation between individual perceptions embedded in a power struggle. It depends upon a continuous, always unfinished and imperfect act of communication. This pluralized vision is at the base of the postmodern critique to 'dignity' named above.

While these three approaches to peace resonate easily with currents of legal philosophy and struggles of Human Rights, a fourth 'peace family' remains rather unrepresented in Western legal discourse. This fourth approach emphasizes the principle of harmony as a dynamic balance between opposites. These harmonic understandings of peace conceive the individual human being always embedded within a variety of systems. Here, the notion of 'community', rightly addressed in the IVR Congress 2022 as a necessary aspect of contemporary reflection, gains a central role. The constant change of focus and the relationality between the particular and the whole is part of this holistic approach. In Western discussion we find this type of argument today more easily in the frame of ecological struggles. In 21st century, a peace conceived as separated from the wellbeing of the planet has become impossible.

After this *tour de force* through the Many Peaces Philosophy and remembering the UNHDR's call setting dignity as "the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (Preamble), there is an obvious question that begs asking: If we acknowledge that there are many approaches to and experiences of peace that are inherent to Human Rights discourse, then which kind of dignity can ever serve as their foundation? I argue, only one that succeeds putting them in relation and is itself not stiffly 'fixed'.¹⁰ As a precondition, 'dignity' needs to find its links to the different peaces at stake, allowing for the recognition of its own diversity.

⁸ "Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy the freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed the highest aspiration of the common people."

⁹ Truth is the principle that Dietrich connects to the so-called 'postmodern peaces'. Despite Dietrich's wording, for a first approach it might be easier to understand this perspective as connected to 'diversity' as the 'lack of One Truth', envisaging a world of co-existing and colliding (subjective) truths.

¹⁰ This consequence echoes Dietrich's call for a relational, integrative approach, which he envisages as 'trans-rational peaces'. To work towards this dynamic balance amongst the many approaches to peace is the goal of Elicitive Conflict Transformation (see paradigmatically Lederach 2003).

3. DIGNITIES

Revising contemporary argumentation on Human Rights¹¹, it is quite easy to find a widespread approach to dignity connecting its meaning to values, particularly to a sense of ‘justice’. One main line, for example, connects dignity to religious monotheistic, mostly Christian, traditions. Dignity derives from the act of divine creation, which bestowed specific traits on humans. Therefore, human worthiness is a result of divine justice (Müller 2020). As a consequence, it is ‘*dignus*’ of man to behave in a certain way, live in a certain way, work in a certain way etc. Going back to the example of the Conquest of America, the legitimation of the enslaving and brutal treatment of the inhabitants of the ‘New World’ depended on this question.

This type of argument pervades also surreptitiously contemporary debates. Particularly explicit is this in the field of international development, which holds the goal of dignifying the lives of others at its core. The legal field is a main territory of this project, resulting in a multitude of legal transplants from the so-called ‘developed’ to the so-called ‘underdeveloped’ World in the name of human dignity and increasing social justice (Gardner 1980). In Western Europe, also cultural clashes find expression in a dignity-debate linked to right/wrong questions: Is it ‘*dignus*’ for a woman (in Europe) to use a burka? Is the dignity of a teacher hampered if she is not allowed to take a hijab, but she would be allowed to take a necklace with a cross? Is the dignity of a schoolkid mistreated when he is obliged to take consistently a mask at school? What about a compulsory vaccination? Is it ‘okay’ for, and thus worthy of, a human being to manage his own death with medical support?¹²

At the same time, the prevailing concept of dignity clearly has a frame connected to the notion of an autonomous rational individual, that reasonably creates and joins structures for the sake of its survival. Looking at the development of ‘dignity’ in European legal philosophy, the context of Enlightenment and later neo-Kantian philosophy marked this approach (Kristeller 1964; Garin 1965; Copenhagen 2019). From this stance, the notion of ‘dignity’ is embedded in specific structures of a modern state, which has the duty to ensure that the dignity of its citizens will be upheld. What surpasses the limit of dignity, is to be inquired following rational universal principles: If human freedom, and thus human free-will, is not secured by certain structures and procedures, then we cannot speak of a ‘real dignity’.

In this frame, dignity is ensured by certain mechanisms within the legal structure, like the procedural guarantees. The ‘right to a fair trial’ is based on the

¹¹ Amongst the vast literature, see for an overview Andorno (2014) and Moka-Mubelo (2017).

¹² See for example the ECHR Cases: S.A.S. v. France (2014) ECHR 695; Dahlab v Switzerland (2001) ECHR 15; Case of Gross v. Switzerland (2013) ECHR 429.

understanding that a specific procedure secures the '*dignus*' treatment of every human (Dupré 2021). This echoes, at a social level, the idea that the right procedure of election (the freedom of choice) secures living in democracy (as a *dignified* form of social life for free individuals), or the right legislative procedure secures laws that are in line with human dignity. At an international level, we need to acknowledge that the mechanisms of Human Rights or the structure of the Security Council are meant to engineer a thriving peaceful world, dignifying human life.

However, several movements have addressed that these dignity-and-peace 'clockworks' do not seem to be working. The existence of power structures beyond the modern state, upon which democratic institutions are nevertheless dependant, are at odds with a sense of dignity across the world. Within the judicial system, the failure to 'secure' the human dignity of the parties in legal procedure, for example by providing solutions within an adequate timeframe, has been a driving factor in the increase of alternative mechanisms like mediation, negotiation and arbitration (Sourdin 2014). When it comes to Human Rights in line with labour and social law, the movement of *Los Indignados* in 2011 as much as Occupy Wallstreet and similar movements in Italy and France have shown that the struggle for dignity is not limited to the imaginary boundaries of national 'underdevelopment'.¹³

Similarly, to think of the human being as an autonomous individual endowed with 'free will' sounds rather like a bad joke in the face of the collapse of whole ecosystems. It has become tragically obvious that the ongoing biological debacle goes along with the shattering of ancient cultural (eco)systems, particularly those that emphasize the embeddedness of the individual within communities and the human within a bigger stream of vital creation. (see for example, Johnston et al. 2012). The desperate calls for ecosystemic balance of Biological Diversity and Cultural Diversity (UN CBD 1992; UN UDCD 2001) put the finger in the wound: (human) dignity does not exist in a vacuum. No dignity without diversity. Problematically, this is the same diversity that runs risk of draining dignity from any meaningfulness for multi-cultural societies. The quandary is the same as it was pointed out in relation to 'dignity' (*Menschenwürde*) as the mother-basic-right in the German Constitution: "the beautiful and the dangerous about [the idea of dignity in Art. 1 GG] is: Everyone can conceive something by this, but it is different for everyone" (Janisch 2019, my translation¹⁴).

My elaborations above show that we are constantly dealing, even if usually only in an implicit manner, with a variety of approaches to dignity both in the

¹³ Interestingly, one of the main sources of inspiration for *Los Indignados* was the book of German-French diplomat, ambassador, writer, concentration camp survivor and French Resistance member Stéphane Hessel. Noteworthy, Hessel had been observer of the editing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. His biography and book *Indignez-vous!* (2011) are paradigmatic for the detour of dignity in the 20th and 21st centuries.

¹⁴ Translations are mine unless detailed in the bibliography.

social life that law and human rights aim to address as much as in the legal-political debate. Justice, security and lately also diversity are recognized as pillars of legal institutions and their founding philosophies. So, it is rather unsurprising that we do find justice-, security- and diversity-based approaches to peace and dignity intertwined in legal mental and pragmatic structures. But what about harmony ('energetic' peaces) and their proposal of recreating a dynamic balance amongst humans in community? We will explore this other approach using a key source for the concept of dignity in Western modern philosophy: Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio on the Dignity of Man*.

4. DIGNITY: A CONCORDIAL CALL

The proposal to bring in community and relationality (back) into a peaceful vision of our societies is not new. Already in the 1950s Erich Neumann, put forward the concept of *concordia* as a "lively peace" (*lebendiger Frieden*) characterized by its intimate connection to life: never stable or fixed but in constant movement (Neumann 2005 [1958/9]). The word's very etymology reveals a significant constellation of meanings. While we find its root also in 'concordat' as a legal term since the 15th century,¹⁵ the Latin word *concordia* means literally "hearts together" (Harper n.d.).¹⁶ *Concordia* referred still in the 14th century to an agreement between persons, meaning also a "state of mutual friendship, amiability" while the verb 'to concord' equated "to reconcile, bring into harmony" (Idem). Neumann's proposal comes so to a similar field of reference as Dietrich would do 50 years later speaking of 'energetic peaces' (Dietrich 2008).

It is therefore not just a mere coincidence that it is the Princeps Concordia, as Pico della Mirandola was nicknamed,¹⁷ who exemplifies the link of dignity with a harmonic perspective on peace and Human Rights. His *Oratio*, later (1504) titled *On the Dignity of Man*, "has been celebrated as the great Renaissance proclamation of a modern ideal of human dignity and freedom" (Copenhaver 2002, 56) and is the work of Renaissance philosophy best known in our time.¹⁸ This text is a clear example of Pico's commitment to bring to concord different

¹⁵ Browne (2018, 180), regarding conventions between the Holy See and a sovereign state. Nowadays it depicts also a legal agreement between indebted companies and their creditors.

¹⁶ *Concordis* is also translated as "of the same mind" (Harper n.d.). Interestingly, this identification of heart and mind is also present in the Chinese character 心 (*xīn*) (Hall et al. 1998).

¹⁷ While this nickname makes both reference to Giovanni's nobility title as Pico della Mirandola et Concordia and particularly to his vision of 'pacifying' the central dispute of his time between Aristotelians and Platonists, his endeavour was explicitly broader. Pico himself used *concordia* also as a conceptual tool to detach from the notion of final truth reserved to the Holy Scriptures (saving his own skin in front of the Inquisition), reestablishing so the relationship between *opinio* and *fides* (Edelheit 2008).

¹⁸ On Pico's life and oeuvre, see, for an overview: Copenhaver (2020).

philosophical traditions, showing a multicultural ancestry of 'Western thought'.¹⁹ This is just the most visible aspect of the actual context of this text, namely Pico's call for a philosophical and ecumenic encounter where his *900 Theses* or *Conclusiones* would be discussed.

The gathering that this *Oratio* aimed to introduce was, however, suspended by Innocent VIII. Giovanni's attempt ended in the inspection of his *900 Theses* by a papal commission and Pico's confinement to gaol in Castel Sant'Angelo (Bori in Borghesi 2012, 15 citing Wirszubski). In June 1487 the Pope "summoned the tribunal of the Inquisition, and on 31 July Giovanni signed an act of submission that granted permission for the copies of the *Conclusiones* to be burned at the stake" (Idem). This was the response to a 'concordial' call by an environment in agony: 15th century Europe was dismantled by wars amongst collapsing and emerging institutions²⁰ that were struggling to demarcate (and secure) 'their' territory and 'their' people as well as to legitimize 'their' power.²¹ This is true as much for the emerging modern states with a new socio-economic ground as for religious institutions that resorted to ever drastic methods – like the Inquisition – to avoid their downfall.

This historical context shows a particular link amongst the appearance of a notion of dignity that served as base for our contemporary understanding of the term, the emergence of the modern state and its law, and the quest for peace beyond winning wars and signing peace treaties. The brittle political, religious and socio-economic environment made necessary to revise the meaning of being human and a dignified life – not very different from our current situation.²² Pico might thus offer refreshing insights for the challenges of our time.

¹⁹ On Pico's syncretism in a broader perspective, see: Farmer (1998).

²⁰ For an overview, see Fletcher (1999) and Hale (1986).

²¹ The mechanisms to 'build' and enforce these conforming elements of what we today define as 'state' were just developing in 15th century. Take for example Castilian-Aragonese Spain, seen as the first 'modern' state, which in 1492 was just building its unity against the common enemy of the Ottoman Empire. In parallel to territorial wars within 'Spanish' territory, the unity of the subjects into 'one people' was pursued by the standardization of 'Spanish' (Castilian) by Nebrija's *Grammar of the Castilian Language* (1492) and the corresponding development of educational institutions. This struggle continued in the Conquest of America (Mignolo 1992).

²² The experience of dismantlement in Pico's time might have been similar to our contemporary experience of a 'BANI' – world: Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible (Cascio 2020).

4.1. A fertile dignity

It is noteworthy that, in Pico's *Oratio*, man's dignity is not connected to a specific vision of what man²³ 'is'. In contrast, his dignifying quality is exactly that his being has no pre-fixed form, it is '*indiscretae*', undetermined (18).²⁴ In other words, what makes human beings worthy of wonder is their ability to become, to change. Without a pre-set model, the human embodies full potential as much as a never-ending process of becoming. She is infused with "every sort of seed and all sprouts of every kind of life" (27).

This very fertile image of what is it to be, or rather to continuously become a *dignous* man is directly related to Neumann's approach to *concordia* and Dietrich's understanding of energetic peaces. *Concordia* means for Neumann²⁵ a peace intimately linked to creative processes, a constant reactivation of the fertility of the whole system (Neumann 2005 [1958/9], {16} ff., 7 ff.). This is possible through the continuous dynamic of unifying and differentiating opposites.

As examples from non-Western traditions, Neumann refers, similar as Dietrich (2008, 29 ff., 68 ff.), to the I Ging, an ancestral Chinese text that grounds on the dynamic between the Yin- and Yang principles symbolized in the Taijitu. Equally, he elaborates on the mandala as a perennial and trans-cultural symbol for the creativity contained within an enclosed (*umfriedeten*) circle, within a fertile void. This idea of the unfolding of human community as connected intimately with fertility and cyclic transformation finds expression also in the archetype of the Great Mother (Neumann 1963 [1955]), who in her womb holds space for the whole Creation.

While Pico refers explicitly in large portions of his text (as in the rest of his oeuvre) to Biblical sources and its characters, he introduces as well other players to orient man's journey. One example is Pico's call to allow our souls to be flooded with a particular and sacred ambition, a Junonian one ("Invadat animum sacra quaedam et Iunonia ambitio (...)," 47). The author puts this Junonian ambition as a guiding example for man to be "not satisfied with what is mediocre" and instead to aspire "*ad summa*" (46). Juno is an expression of the Great Mother, the Roman Queen of Heaven and Mother of the Gods. She is the "nearly monotheistic deity of women" (Walker 1988, 209) in ancient Rome, a composite deity with a pervasive presence. Juno Curitis, for example, was the primeval mother of all the clans.

²³ While the contemporary inquiry on dignity includes all humanity beyond their gendered identities, I use the term 'man' when referring specifically to the historical source written in 15th century, which was addressed to men rather than to women. Otherwise, I use interchangeably female and male pronouns to address 'humans'.

²⁴ The numbers in brackets refer to the number of Pico's proposition according to the edition of Borghesi (2012).

²⁵ He refers explicitly to Bertalanffy's research on systems (1949).

Later on, her role and some of her titles as Star of the Sea,²⁶ visible in her star-shaped emblem, was inherited by the Virgin Mary.

As it is often the case for female deities, Juno's being and influence changed according to different phases. Consequently, in some phases "she was both a chaste virgin and – in other phases – a deity of sexual lust, as Juno Caprotina, whose fertility rites were held to fructify the fig trees (Rose 1959, 217)." Here lies the key for Pico's reference and his call upon man: Juno renewed her virginity each year and man is equally called upon to renew himself constantly. In doing so Giovanni puts the endeavour of the philosopher, and the *dignus* man that he envisages in the frame of the archetypical Great Mother or Great Goddess.

4.2. "Neither, nor" or "Yes, and"

The union of the Great Goddess with her counterpart through an act of communion, *hieros gamos* or Holy Wedding, depicts a union of opposites in the same way as the ancient yin-yang symbol portrays. It is this encompassing *communion* the one that allows for a lively *community* to unfold, one that integrates diversity and unicity in continuous recreation. Consequently, the philosophies that connect to this concordial perspective are based upon a logic of 'neither/nor' and 'yes/and'. The divine is neither one aspect nor the other alone, rather it is one *and* the other at the same time.

It makes sense that man, holding a "changing and metamorphous nature" (33) is "neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal" (20, 2). It is nothing definite and it can become everything. This approach echoes other philosophical traditions. Take for example the worshipping of Hindu deity Shiva in the Six verses of Nirvana: "I am neither the mind, nor the intellect, nor the ego, nor the mind-stuff;/ I am neither the body, nor the changes of the body;/ I am neither the senses of hearing, taste, smell, or sight,/ Nor am I the ether, the earth, the fire, the air;/ I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute –/ I am Shiva, I am Shiva (*Shivoham, Shivoham*)."²⁷

Since man entails the potential to become everything, della Mirandola's understanding of the human condition moves from 'neither, nor' to 'yes, and', to end, in a radical sense of wholeness as the base for human condition and dignity. Using biblical references, he chooses, of the three angelical beings (seraphs, cherubs and thrones) the figure of the cherubs as the model for man to become *dignus*. While seraphs are in the heights of love and thrones are dedicated to the duties of active life, the cherub "uses his light both to prepare us for the seraphic fire *and* likewise to illuminate for us the judgement of the thrones" (65; my italics). Becoming like a cherub, man will be able to be "raised from him to the heights of love *and* descend from him, well taught and prepared, to the duties of the active

²⁶ Also, as Queen of Heaven, Lily, Rose, and Blessed Virgin.

²⁷ For a complete version of the text in English see Sankaracharya (2004).

life” (66, *idem*). The cherub represents thus an integrative and dynamic force that allows to love *and* to judge, to be “for the creator alone” *and* to “take care of inferior things” of the active life, to access experience with “charity” *and* “with proper consideration of their worth” (55, 57). By emulating them man gets access to “supreme height” (like seraphs) *and* “great power” (like thrones) (62).

Thus, following this example, man will shine with cherubic light when he meditates “on the Creator in His creation *and* on creation in the Creator” (my italics), engaged in this dialectic movement with the tranquillity of contemplation (56). In expressions like this, the relationality, movement and integration of opposite dualities is explicit: creator and creation, subject and object are interwoven. It is this connection the one that fosters life, a dignified life for man. Man is called to go through and beyond every duality and gather “himself into the centre of his own unity, thus becoming a single spirit with God (...)” (30). On the contrary, if he would actualize only one aspect of his being, he would not become a *dignus* man, but a slave to a part of himself (37, 38).

This integrative quality links man to the divine because Pico’s ‘God’ is himself related to the whole life potential at the same time. ‘He’ is emphatically the creator of the supercelestial, the heavenly globes *and* the “excremental and filthy parts of the lower world”, as much as the creator of the intelligences, the eternal souls *and* “the multitude of forms of animal life” that inhabit them respectively (11). On the one side, ‘He’ is set within a wider sense of spirituality and sacredness, and on the other ‘He’ is brought to the sphere of the vernacular (10).

The union of opposites, but even more so the dynamic emergent between them as much as the unfinishedness of the process, present in Pico’s elaborations resonates with philosophies often deemed foreign to ‘Western’ modern Human Rights philosophy and advocacy. The *Oratio* shows, however, an approach to man’s dignity that is bond to its boundarilessness: to remain true to it in a constant process of renewal, like Juno renews her virginity over and over again.

4.3. The Many into One, the One into Many

A further reference that della Mirandola uses to speak to the shapeshifting character of a *dignus* man is Proteus. This prophetic old man of the sea (*halios gerôn*) is characterized by his ability to change shape. Particularly interesting for us is that he, like Melikertes,²⁸ is assumed to be the “Greek equivalent of the Phoenician sea-god Melkart” (Atsma n.d.). During the *egersis*, the annual resurrection ritual of Melkart, the god ‘died’ and was awakened or resuscitated, eventually through a sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) with the goddess Astarte (Bonnet 1988; 2005).

²⁸ According to Kerényi, Melikertes was a milk-brother of Dyonisos and son of Ino, “a primeval dionysic woman, a Mother of God” (Kerényi 1976, 246), later named Leucothea (White Goddess).

The divine couple and their sacred marriage is, in fact, addressed in different parts of the *Oratio*. Connecting Biblical and Egyptian mythology, Giovanni asserts that once we, inspired by the cherubic spirit, have reached the point of accompanying the angelical beings on Jacob's ladder towards God, "then shall we descend, dashing the one into many with Titanic force like Osiris, and ascend, drawing together with Phoebean might the many into one, like Osiris's limbs" (82). This is an intertextual reference to the complex myth of Isis and Osiris, the Holy Couple performing recurrently the ancestral Holy Wedding.

In the corresponding cult, Isis devoured Osiris each year and gave him life again. He was torn to pieces and reassembled. In doing so, Isis formed him a new penis of clay and breathed life into him. Thus, Osiris arose and they held the Holy Wedding, whereupon life could go on (Walker 1993, 464 ff, 819 ff.). The famous story of Seth's murder to his brother, that Pico points at here, has thus a blueprint, and, most importantly, an unnamed protagonist: Isis.²⁹ She is another expression of the Great Mother, giver and destroyer of all life and mother of all heroes/kings/gods (Dietrich 2008, 57 ff.). Isis is the Goddess from whom all becoming arose, daughter of Nout, who equally embodies the archetype of the Great Mother, in form of the sky.³⁰

Osiris' death and rebirth as a result of Isis' loving power has a particular connotation for our inquiry on human and dignity. Historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade noted that this mythical process refers to the transformation of identity (Eliade 1961). This is the symbolic death of the one who is initiated into sacred mysteries (as the Eleusinian mysteries Pico refers to), so that a 'new man' can be born. Pico's notion of man as a being full of potential, with no boundaries for self-realization, that becomes *dignus* of being man through this constant care for his own process of becoming, is totally in line with the cycle of death and rebirth portrayed in the myth of the *hieros gamos* of Isis and Osiris as one vitalizing process.

²⁹ There is a strong tendency to see Isis as "a secondary figure to her husband Osiris" (Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum), despite the evidence for the twin-quality between Isis and her lover-brother Osiris. According to Walker (1988, 198), Egyptian sources used Athene as a title of Isis meaning "I have come from myself." Here the self-referential emphasis already presented above resonates again. Asserting her key role in Egyptian mythology, see the Egyptian scriptures: "In the beginning there was Isis, the Oldest of the Old. She was the Goddess from whom all becoming arose" (cit. in Walker 1993, 464).

³⁰ In Egyptian mythology, the Great Mother first appears as Tefnet, daughter of Creator Atum – the All. Together with her brother and bridegroom Shu, she conceived Nout and Geb. This siblings' pair, in turn, were parents of Osiris, Seth, Isis and Nephthys, all protagonists of the widespread Creation myth.

5. BECOMING ONE: DIGNITY AND COMMUNITY

But Pico goes beyond a reference to a specific myth. The metaphor of the *hieros gamos* and the union of life and death in one vitalizing process (93 ff., 108) return several times, e.g. when it comes to find the “most holy peace” for “grave internal wars” (87 ff.), the central conflict of his time particularly in regard to the ‘Christian family’ just before the Reformation. To achieve human dignity means to rejoice in this “*individua copula*”, in this “harmonious friendship, in which all souls, in one mind (a mind that is above all minds) are not only in agreement but, indeed, in a certain ineffable way, inwardly become one” (93 f.).

This idea of communion is at the core of the goal-path of being-becoming a dignified ‘man’. Thus, the unfixed unity with or within a whole, with and within a community, be it a ‘small’ community or the community of the whole Creation, is at the core of Pico’s text. Becoming “a guest at the table of the gods while still alive on earth” (108), nurturing oneself from this fountain-like fullness,³¹ is intimately connected to Pico’s vision of man’s dignity. This loving bond with the life-giving force, embodied e.g. in Sophia, is what makes becoming a *philosopher* so central for human dignity. Peace, friendship, happiness, all these are achievable for the *dignus* man once he “curbe[s] the drive of the emotions” (71) and “disperse[s] the darkness of reason”, so that neither “our emotions run amok” nor “our reason imprudently run off course.”³² Dignity entails thus enhancing a consciousness that integrates and goes beyond emotion *and* reason.

Being conscious of the unlimited potential relying within each man and mankind as a whole, Pico calls us to care for this wonder (46 ff.). Interestingly, the importance of care as a specific quality of relations and as a category for philosophy and ethics has been highlighted also from a feminist perspective on dignity. Following Gilligan, Held, for example, advances an ethics of care (Gilligan 1982; Held 1993; 2006) putting concrete relationships to the foreground of the debate on dignity. Interestingly, also the methodologies of (elicitive) conflict transformation, informed by the Many Peaces Philosophy put relationality at the core of its approach.

³¹ The metaphor of “fountain-like fullness” nourishing and inebriating celestial beings and the *dignus* man (98, 108) directly recalls the image of the Great Mother, for example in the shape of Artemis or Diana, goddesses depicted with many breasts and mythological sources of the Milky Way. The nourishment metaphors are consistent throughout the text particularly when Giovanni comes to speak about the Socratic frenzies (109 ff.). Interestingly, Diana’s image was sculpted often “in two materials, alabaster and bronze, one white and the other black, denoting the luminous and dark qualities of the Goddess” (Penna 1993, 122). Also, here the union of opposites finds a new expression.

³² Noteworthy is here particularly, that reason *can* run off course, reason is dark: a very different understanding from the “light of reason” that guiding modern man. Equally, Pico speaks of “the tumults of reason agitated and tossed about between the contradictions of speech and the captiousness of syllogisms” (90).

6. CONCLUDING NOTES

Pico's text was later interpreted much restrictively, particularly under the influence of his nephew's (Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola) editorial work. These observations on Pico's *Oratio*, however, show the existing diversity of understandings of dignity at the base of contemporary Human Rights politics and law. Looking at dignity as a prism of approaches with different sources, aims, languages and problematics, makes visible the strong tension existing within this concept. As jurists and philosophers, we are called to avoid rhetoric simplification in detriment of using dignity's full potential to enhance human life. It is our task to put these different threads in relation with each other making of this tension a creative interplay.

In this line and integrating Neumann's and Dietrich's proposals regarding 'peace', the mandate to protect dignity is strongly related to the duty to enhance the constant recreation of a dynamic balance. In this vein, we can speak of the need to integrate harmony-based approaches, understanding harmony as the possibility to put conflicting elements in dialogue, and not as a (in Dietrich's terms) modern understanding of peace would suggest, attempting to suppress dissent. If we do so, it is not sufficient to read Human Rights merely as provisions securing human dignity as an object. From the perspective of fostering enlivened communities, dignity is intimately bound to concrete relations in constant change. A change that, while it cannot be controlled, requires care.

But what could this mean for law? A law that materializes these Human Rights aims to foster a holistic unfolding of the human potential of the individual *in relation* to the whole, recreating life in intra-personal as much as in communal, social and global layers. As exploratory research, this paper cannot aim to provide definitive answers but can conclude best by signalling lines for further research on the potential implications of such an integrative approach to dignity.

Some aspects to explore further are linked to the extent in which this approach could contribute to transitional justice processes and, in another scale, to retributive justice models. In terms of contemporary legal philosophy, Mette Lebech offers interesting conceptual tools that dialogue with the notion of dignity as experience, linking dignity to the lived experience of value (Lebech 2011). The aspect of intersubjective mutual recognition addressed by Buchwalter (2021) addresses also relational aspects linked to dignity. A relational approach to dignity includes 'naturally' its relation to Nature, addressed today in the debate around 'Nature Rights' and 'biodignity' (Pele et al. 2022).

Furthermore, to foster an enlivening dignity, this law needs to be conceived and performed as an organic and enlivening (law) system. Such a law necessarily entails actors (law agents) that are themselves connected to their own full human potential. Equally, it requires infrastructures that provide spaces to engage with conflict inquiring as much into aspects of security, justice or truth – as they do so

far in judicial settings –, as into issues related to (dis-)harmony. In this vein, we can envisage judicial work engaging differently and holistically with conflict³³ while the preparation of (human rights) lawyers could entail training in the line of conflict transformation. When human rights and law ground on the notion that dignity requires to recreate and celebrate cyclically a reencounter with our human potential, the whole legal architecture based on that ground is dedicated to care for this wonder and to foster the force bringing it to life.

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³³ Sami Storch’s work on Systemic Law is inspirational in this regard (Paiva Sales 2024).

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