

Human Dignity between Kitsch and Deification¹

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Horizontal Honor and Vertical Honor

What is so great about human beings that each and every one of them deserves moral respect? Strangely enough, respect for humans is like aristocratic respect, honoring you for who you are, not for what you do, and who you are depends on your family tree. In the case of humans, the family concerned is, so to speak, the family of humanity.

Yet there is a vast difference between social aristocratic honor and moral honor (respect) for humans as humans. Social honor is typified by two dimensions: the vertical honor you owe to those above you in rank and the horizontal honor you owe to your equals. Moral honor has only one dimension: the horizontal. This respect is extended to all humans, even the cruelest criminals and the most mentally challenged. Even human corpses are to be shown respect. Dead bodies, even those of our enemies, are not animal cadavers. They are expected to be treated differently, a difference that manifests respect.

There may be a serious tension between social honor and moral respect, for we are often called to morally respect individuals whom we intensely disrespect socially. The poet

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W. H. Auden composed an epigraph to his 1930 poems “let us honour if we can / the vertical man / Though we value none / but the horizontal one.”² Did he mean that we can honor only the dead, the horizontal, and are incapable of honoring the living, the ones who are still vertical? Or perhaps he had an erotic private joke in mind. I do not know. But my essay is about the reverse of Auden’s verses—“let us honor if we can the horizontal man, though we value none but the vertical one”—meaning, let us deal with the purely horizontal honor that is moral respect, even though it is vertical, social honor in which we often indulge.

The Religious Answer

What justifies respect for human beings as human beings? One influential answer to this vexing question is that human beings as such do not deserve respect. The source of respect for humans rests somewhere else; it is only because humans are created in the image of their creator that they deserve respect. Since God is the sole creator, God, and only God, deserves veneration. Respect for humans is merely a reflected glory, emanating from the glory of God. So the answer to the question—what is so great about humans that makes them deserve respect?—is that there is nothing great about humans. God is great, and humans are created in the image of the great God.

But then what is it to be created in the image of God? This remains terribly obscure because, based on traditional readings of the scriptures, God is not supposed to have an image in any literal sense. The idea of being created in the image of God is that there is some unspecified similarity in virtue such that humans are similar to God and this similarity reflects glory on human beings. It does not mean a symmetric relation, however. It is like saying that “Tel Aviv is more similar to New York than New York is similar to Tel Aviv.” Similarity, as Thomas of Aquinas tells us, is a non-symmetric relation.

I should add that the idea of humans deserving respect for being created in the image of God is backed by a powerful myth of origin, which tells us that humanity descended from one couple that was created by God. Hence, respect for being created in the image of God is extended to all humans because we are descendents of that first primordial couple. All humans thus constitute one extended family, the family of humanity.

The universalistic reading of the relevant Biblical verses from the Jewish tradition, based on the view that all humans are created in the image of God, is not shared by all who belong to that tradition. There are very distressing readings, mainly by Jewish mystics, that narrow the category of being a human to being a Jew. Noted among them is the Talmudic saying, attributed to the mystic sage Shimon Bar-Yoahi, “you are called

² W. H. Auden, Epigraph (1930), *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996).

humans but the gentiles are not to be called humans.”³

So far we have ascertained a prominent religious justification for respecting humans. Contrary to such an account, humanistic morality does not appeal to the Divine for any moral justification. Humans are the measure of all moral things. Thus, the question of why humans deserve respect is answered in humanistic moral theory by an appeal to humans or to human attributes that provides direct justification, without going through the mediation of something else such as God.

The challenge to the humanistic approach is to find a justifying attribute, that is, a good-making feature of humans by virtue of which each and every human being deserves respect. Being human is not usually regarded as good enough to justify respect because it is regarded as a merely descriptive term to designate a biological species and hence has no moral bearing. Against this common view, I maintain that being human is the right title to justify respect as humans. Moreover, other justifying attributes shoot either too high or too low, whereas being human is right on target. An example of shooting too low is respect for humans as potential victims. An example of shooting too high is respect for humans as potential moral legislators. Shooting too low involves kitsch; shooting too high involves deification. Both are seductive traps. My concern in this essay is to clarify what I believe these traps to be and to extricate the discussion from some claptraps that go along with it.

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Moral Kitsch

Once, as a young man, I received a present, an album of photographs called *The Family of Man*, which was fairly popular at the time. The album was based on an exhibition that went under this name in New York and under *The Great Family of Man* in Paris. In it, people from different races and ethnic groups with exotically varied physiques engaged in what humans all share together: being born, getting married, working, dying, but also laughing while we are still alive. An ashen, wise, old Hungarian Jewish lady who worked with me in a youth village saw the album, leafed through it, and muttered to my astonishment, “this is kitsch.” I was deeply troubled by what she said. Not that I liked the album that much, but I liked the person who gave it to me. Years later, I read Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, which discussed *The Great Family of Man* exhibition in Paris. He objected to the exhibition for postulating Adamism—a human essence underneath superficial, though colorful, diversity. This was not quite the point of my old lady friend. She found *The Family of Man*, though technically well done,

³ Shimon Bar-Yoahi, Tractate Ybamot 61. The translation is mine.

unbearably sentimental. She sensed that kitsch and sentimentally are intimately related. This, in any case, is my point: sentimentality is part and parcel of kitsch. I also claim that sentimentality is bad for art and can be bad for morality.

Kitsch, in short, is not merely an epithet for bad taste; it is a term of criticism that should apply equally to art and to morality. There is kitsch art, but there is also kitsch morality. Sentimental humanism, its noble sentiments notwithstanding, is highly amenable to the two faces of kitsch: the moral and the aesthetic.

Carl Jung wrote in the early 1930s on James Joyce's *Ulysses*. He found the "atrophy of feeling" in *Ulysses* rather refreshing and took it as a sign of Joyce reacting to the "hideous sentimentality" around him. Jung wrote, "There is a good deal of evidence to show that we actually are in a sentimentality hoax of gigantic proportions. Think of the lamentable role of popular sentiment in wartime! Think of our so-called humanitarianism!" And he goes on to write, "sentimentality is the superstructure erected upon brutality."⁴

Jung's metaphorical use of Karl Marx's division between base and superstructure, rendering brutality as the base and sentimentality as its superstructure, makes for a deep observation. It is clear what is wrong with brutality, but what exactly is wrong with sentimentality? An answer to that question will also provide a partial answer to what is wrong with kitsch.

For one, sentimentality distorts reality. This does not mean that sentimentality is always and necessarily about something. A tune on the violin or, even better, on the saxophone can be sentimental without being about anything. But Mary Midgley is right in her article on "Brutality and Sentimentality" that sentimentality involves "misrepresentation of the world in order to indulge our feelings."⁵

Indeed, sentimental kitsch is a second-order sentiment. Milan Kundera, a great connoisseur of kitsch, writes memorably,

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes the kitsch kitsch.⁶

⁴ C. G. Jung, "Ulysses: A Monologue," *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, vol. 15, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1966) 122.

⁵ Mary Midgley, "Brutality and Sentimentality," *Philosophy* 54.209 (July 1979): 385–9.

⁶ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 251.

What enables the semantic ascent from tier (“tear”) one to tier (“tear”) two is the object as an object of great innocence. After all, what is more innocent than children running on grass? How does all of it tie together with our concern for respecting human beings?

Here is the connection. An influential justification for respecting human beings is the stress on humans, all humans, as capable of suffering. I believe that there is great merit in this view, but it also carries with it a danger, the danger of seeing all humans as victims. But that is not the end of it. In order to morally dignify the victims, they are always made to look innocent and pure. This is where sentimental kitsch plays its role. The demand to respect human beings when directed toward the innocent is easy, but the idea of respect for humans is most needed when they are not innocent or only partially innocent. This is when the sentimental distortion of presenting victims as innocent and pure is detrimental to the need and use of respect for humans.

Kitsch, in short, is not merely an epithet for bad taste; it is a term of criticism that should apply equally to art and to morality.

Slavery is the epitome of human degradation and human cruelty, no matter who the slave is. A black man should not need to be as innocent as Uncle Tom to deserve respect as a human being and to be spared the cruelty and humiliation of Master Simon Legree. It may be with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in mind that Richard Rorty complains about Immanuel Kant’s “astonishing claim that sentimentality has nothing to do with morality.” On Rorty’s account, “the emergence of the human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories.”⁷

Rorty can easily claim that Harriet Beecher Stowe, with all of her sentimentality, contributed far more to ending slavery than the cool Kant ever did with his account of human dignity. Yet I believe that Kant’s objection to sentimentality is right and important. What is right about it is the need to avoid presenting humans as predominantly victims for the sake of moral consideration and as always pure and innocent in order to gain our sympathy for the victims. Sentimentality is a double sin: it detracts from human dignity by presenting humans as basically victims, and it distorts by making them always appear innocent.

On many occasions, the way “sentimental education” deals with the need to extend moral respect to all humans is by turning everyone, perpetrators and victims alike, into victims. For example, cruel criminals are depicted as helpless victims of harsh childhoods in broken homes, and never as morally responsible adults.

⁷ Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 175, 172.

Kitsch sentimentality creates a culture of victimization. It sentimentalizes others, the marginal, by endowing them with great spirituality to compensate for their lack of power and thus making them objects of great innocence, who are constantly attacked by the soulless mighty. It is wrong, very wrong indeed, to humiliate the other and the marginal. The marginal do not need to be precious, pure, or soulful to be treated as humans. I believe this is the whole point of respecting humans. It does not hinge on anything noble about human beings.

I am sure that many of us fidgeted in our seats watching the American medics searching for lice in Saddam Hussein's homeless-like, unkempt hair. It was meant to humiliate him. It was a border-line case between social humiliation and human degradation. There is no question that had it been a clearer case of human degradation—say, publicly searching his private parts—we would feel that something wrong happened. Hussein is one of the least innocent persons on earth. Compared to what was done in 1958 to Nuri Said, a former Prime Minister of Iraq who was caught and assassinated by a mob and dressed as a woman, whose body was dragged through the streets of Baghdad, searching for lice in Hussein's hair seems minor. The point is that we should preserve human dignity even with despicable people like Hussein. Human dignity is not about innocence, whereas kitsch sentimentality is. Kitsch, as Kundera pointed out, is the absolute denial of shit in our lives, both in the literal and metaphorical senses of the word. It is easy to morally respect women and children who look as if they have been taken from a Murillo painting. But it is hard to respect people who are pretty shitty.

It is not just respect for humans that is affected by the sentimental picture of humans as victims. Our idea of justice too is seriously affected. Victorian morality was quite happy to focus on and sentimentalize the poor, with the understanding that distributive justice, all the way down the social ladder, did not go with it. Doing something for the pitiful poor, says the sentimentalist, is all right; we are not callous. But progressive taxes? Heaven forbid.

It is fine to start, as John Rawls does, with the least advantaged. It is far from fine to sentimentalize the least advantaged so as to ignore those who do not come in handy as objects of sentimentality. Distributive justice, unlike sentimental justice, is concerned with the whole social ladder. I do not object to starting with the least advantaged, as long as sentimentality does not block us from proceeding to others in need. I am not against starting with “women and children” as emblems of civilians, if it does not stop with them. Indeed, I find great virtue in starting the lexicographic order of justice with widows and orphans, as in Biblical Judaism or Koranic Islam, where justice is first and foremost justice to these members of the community. The idea is that these two categories are categories of the most vulnerable people, not necessarily the least advantaged. The widow may be a widow of a rich man and so too with the orphan, but they are still the most vulnerable because of their inability to defend their own interests. This is an important insight about justice.

Of course, widows and orphans are obvious candidates for kitsch sentimentality, but we should not lose the insight that these two categories present an account of justice. Merchants are far from being objects of sentimental kitsch, but they may be vulnerable all the same. Indian merchants in Kampala or Chinese merchants in Phnom Penh are, on the whole, more prosperous than their neighbors, but they are, historically speaking, far more vulnerable than their neighbors in their ability to defend their wellbeing in rather hostile surroundings. They are not at the bottom of Rawls's scale, but that does not mean that a lexicographic order of doing justice should not start with them. My objection to the use of "women and children" and "orphans and widows" is not that they are not morally relevant categories; it is their use as kitsch emblems of victimization that I find objectionable.

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Another problem with sentimental kitsch is the emotional laziness that goes with it. It makes things too easy, emotionally. Respecting despicable humans just because they are humans is truly hard, even if we say to ourselves that there are two kinds of respect involved, as Stephen Darwall has it: appraisal respect for achievements and recognition respect that involves adopting some constraints on our behavior, due to the fact that the other is human. Recognition respect is still emotionally difficult because we are asked to extend it to someone for whom we lack any appraisal respect or whom we may even overtly loathe. Transforming the innocent, suffering victim into an object of respect hides the true difficulty of respecting all human beings when we need to most.⁸

Deification in Marx

Marx insisted that he was not engaged in morality but in science. But anyone who has ever read his work will recognize a moral tone in it. Moreover, it is clear that the key concept of Marx's morality is exploitation, robbing the workers of the surplus value that belongs to them as the sole producers of valuable products. I think that Marx understood himself as doing science and not engaged with morality because he viewed science as consisting of hard thinking, whereas he viewed morality as woolly, soft, and sentimental. Morality can treat the workers only as poor people, but it does not respect them for the producers they are. For Marx, the workers were exploited, yet he did not view them first and foremost as victims, but instead regarded them as producers, indeed, as creators. Marx's world was a human world constructed by the workers and not a natural world created by God. Of course nature existed, but it was mediated by human civilization. A civilization is created by humans or, more to the point, by humans who are productive, namely, the workers.

⁸ Stephen L. Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics and Personality: Ethics in Moral Psychology*, ed. John Deigh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 65–78.

The shift in Marx is from viewing humans as victims towards the deification of humans as the creators of everything valuable—well, not all humans, only the paradigmatic workers.

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The deification of workers, and by that I mean ascribing to them an attribute that was primarily an attribute of God the creator, was an invitation to deprive non-creators of their humanity. Indeed, it is not by accident that the implementation of Marxism by Marxist-Leninists made such extensive use of the dehumanizing term “parasites.” Parasites live at the expense of the producers; they do not belong to the category of *homo faber*, the human as maker, which is the only way to be human. According to this way of seeing the world, the parasites should be eliminated or at least cruelly “re-educated.” Lenin was all for “the *cleansing* of the Russian land of any harmful insects, swindler-fleas, wealthy bugs and so on and so on.”⁹

Let me add in passing that Marx’s anti-sentimentalism did not spare Communism from kitsch. Communism was full of the *psblost* of the “smiling workers’ solidarity” standing for the smiling future humanity. (*Psblost* is the Russian term for kitsch so beautifully glossed by another great connoisseur of kitsch, Vladimir Nabokov, in his book on Gogol.) But Communist kitsch is one more wretched example of sentimentality as the super-structure of brutality.

Deification in Kant

It does not matter what the good-making feature on which we are supposed to ground our respect for humans is; it is clear that not all humans have it. For every good-making feature, there is a disease or a defect that robs some humans from having it. So any good-making feature above and beyond being human narrows the base as to who are the humans deserving moral respect. Those who are not within the scope of the good-making property are on the other side of the coin of deification, which is defilement.

It was Kant, under the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who invoked the modern idea of respect for human individuals based not on status and merit but on human dignity. Kant’s story is well known, but this does not necessarily mean that it is well understood.

Did Kant really break away, as is usually assumed, from the religious idea that humans deserve respect only on account of their reflected glory? Does Kant not suggest a secularized version of reflected glory as the source of respecting humans? After all, he does

⁹ As quoted in Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999) 258.

claim in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that “the object of reverence is the law alone” and that “all reverence for person is properly only reverence for the law.”¹⁰

By Kant’s account, rational humans exemplify the law, but it is the moral law, and the moral law alone, that primarily deserves respect. Humans deserve respect only derivatively as a reflected glory from the glory of the moral law.

Reading into Kant the idea of human dignity as based on reflected glory is not the only possible way to read him. A direct reason to respect humans in Kant’s work is that they are potentially the creators of the moral law. All rational and reasonable humans have the potential of being legislators of the universal moral law. Humans are the functional equivalent in Kant’s scheme to the divine lawgiver in the religious scheme. It is not humans that we are meant to respect but the humanity in us and in others. This humanity in us is the capacity to be rational or at least reasonable, which is the capacity we need in order to be legislators of the moral law.

Respect for humans (rational or reasonable) is to treat them not only as means but also as ends. Kant adheres to the opposite implication: not respecting humans means treating them as mere tools. I believe, however, that the epitome of humiliation is not in treating humans only as tools but in treating them not even as tools. It was reported that inmates in the Holocaust concentration camps who were used merely as tools, say in factories that produced ammunition for the German army, found it less degrading than people in the camps who were forced to do meaningless, Sisyphean work, such as digging holes in the ground and then filling them up. This was true even in cases where inmates were used as tools to produce ammunition to be used against their own people.

Two quick queries stand up. What about those who lack the power of reason, like the mentally challenged? Does Kant exempt us from respecting the humanity in these people? And why should we respect the mere potential of a capacity that can easily be misused? There is no question that the Nazis Reinhard Heydrich and Hans Frank had the potential to reason, yet they became war criminals of the first order and thus botched their humanity. Are we to respect them? Do the two retain any shred of human dignity?

Humans, by Kant’s account, are the only creatures who can set ends and thus they become ends in themselves. This, combined with their capacity for rationality, is what invites respect. But Nazi ends are despicable. So why should we extend any form of respect to people who set such ends? Respecting mere potential is as absurd as admiring clubs of people with high IQs irrespective of what they have done with it. (There are such clubs.)

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row 1958) 69.

The tension between the potential and the actual riddles liberal thought. Indeed, there is a systematic ambiguity in what we might term “liberal morality”: it concerns the crucial terms “individual” and “autonomy.” On the one hand, being an autonomous individual is the highest achievement according to morality. On the other hand, all human beings are presumed to be autonomous individuals, and, as such, deserve respect.

One may argue that it would make more sense for Kant to adopt a full-fledged presumptive notion of respect rather than a categorical one. Namely, respect each and every human being, unless and until you discover that he or she lacks the capacity to reason or has somehow botched this capacity in a serious way.

Kant’s language about respect for humans is couched in the language of rights, as are most contemporary concerns with respect. Each and every person has the right to live with human dignity. I believe that, as far as respect is concerned, the language of rights is the wrong language to adopt. At the end of World War II, Stalin suggested that the Nazi leaders should be exposed naked in a cage and transported all over Europe. I do not see the right of the Nazi leaders not to be thus exposed: after all, they did everything possible to forfeit all of their own rights. But I do see the force of the obligation not to treat any human being, Nazi leaders included, in such a manner. To treat humans with moral respect is a duty that is not always correlated with a right to respect.

Does respect for humans include respect for the life of human beings? I would think that a constitutive part of moral respect for humans is respecting their lives, even in cases when they themselves fail to show any respect for life, such as murderers. Capital punishment should be regarded as a very serious violation of human dignity. Not so for Kant. His retributive criminal justice is pretty ferocious: castrating rapists, enslaving thieves, and—more to the point—executing murderers. Yet when Kant deals with suicide, according to which, “to destroy the morality in one’s own person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world,” the impression is that respecting the humanity in us requires respect for life.

Kant justified respect for humans by a sort of anxious deification. It was anxious because he knew that humans are quite disappointing creatures, but that there is still something about them that is very noble. We can find a glaring example of Kant’s anxious deification in his saying: “The moral law is holy (inviolable). Man is indeed unholy enough: but he must regard humanity in his person as holy.”¹¹

The full swing of Kant’s tendency for deification is to be found not so much in his *Second Critique* dealing with morality but rather in his *Third Critique* dedicated to the aesthetic, in the sections addressing the idea of the sublime as that which is absolutely

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lara Denis (Peterborough: Broadview, 2005) 169.

great and not just great in comparison. “True sublimity,” argues Kant, “must be sought only in the mind of the [subject] judging, not in the natural object,” the kind of object that, due to our sense of the sublime, we tend to deify.¹² Indeed, “the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own destination, which, by a certain subreption, we attribute to an object of nature.”¹³ Kant combines morality with aesthetics: the holy humanity in us and the sublime.

A Loose End

The contrast between the two attitudes towards humans, sentimental kitsch on one hand and deification on the other, does not tell us the whole story. It must be qualified. I did not mention cases of deifying the victims, such as Jesus or Ali (the son-in-law of Muhammad, in the Islamic *Shi'ah*), as emblems of deification of the innocent victim. Indeed, the cult of the martyrs in every religion or in each nation is saturated with deification. There is heavenly kitsch as much as earthly kitsch.

But, given the choice between the two, kitsch or deification, which do I choose? Art critic Clement Greenberg made the celebrated claim that the alternative to abstract art nowadays is not Michelangelo but kitsch. Figurative art is not an option; it is bound to be kitsch. It is true; I believe that figurative art leads more easily to kitsch than does abstract art, but it also led, historically speaking, to better art. The portrayal of humans as sufferers leads more readily to kitsch than the picture of humans as abstractions in a moral theory. But historically speaking, it makes for better morality. As much as I hate kitsch, I side with the moral picture of the human as sufferer rather than with the human as creator.

To treat humans with moral respect is a duty that is not always correlated with a right to respect.

Just Being Human

The trait by virtue of which humans deserve moral respect is the trait of being human, nothing more and nothing less. This trait steers clear of the Scylla of viewing humans as victims and the Charybdis of viewing humans as demigods. But the question—what is the moral relevance of being human?—is still with us. Is this trait not a mere biological characteristic, and, as such, can it support respect for humans as a moral category?

I believe that the question—what is the moral relevance of being human to moral theory?—is the wrong question to ask. It is like asking whether matter matters to

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1966) 95.

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 96.

physics, life to biology, or language to the theory of language. Morality, if anything, is about the relations we must have with other human beings thinly conceived (namely, not under thick descriptions such as Irish, Catholic, or working class). Morality is about human relations and what we owe to each other so as to keep the proper relations.

“Human being” is an organizing notion of morality in the same way that “life” is an organizing notion of biology. Biology is about living organisms. This does not mean that life is necessarily a theoretical term in modern biology. It may be an archaic term that serves only as an organizing notion without being an internal notion in biology itself. This is obviously the case with the notion of matter in regard to modern physics. “Matter” serves no role in modern physics, but it is still the organizing, pre-systematic way to tell what physics is about.

Organizing notions determine what is relevant to an account rather than the account determining the relevance of the organizing notion. What is morally relevant is determined, at the very least, by whether it holds *prima facie* for all human beings. That all

human beings deserve moral consideration is constitutive of what morality is. Morality, above all, provides an explication of what it is to treat humans as humans. It may do more and explicate our relations to other creatures, but at least no human can be alien to it. Unlike the notion of matter that is not part of physics but an organizing notion of physics, respect for humans as humans is also an internal notion of morality itself and not just an organizing notion. In this way, it may resemble the notion of life, which is both an organizing notion of biology and an internal notion. But as an internal notion,

respect for humans as humans is not a clear notion. What does it mean positively to treat humans as humans?

My claim is that we understand the internal sense of respect for humans as humans basically through the negative sense of not treating humans as humans. The negative sense is humiliation. Humiliation is treating humans as non-humans—as tools, as animals, as sub-humans, etc. By humiliation, I mean human degradation, rather than humiliation in the social sense of the word, which concerns your station and rank in society.

There is a current advertisement in the newspaper on behalf of *B'Tselem*—The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, to which I proudly belong. It is a picture of a Palestinian standing on a rock, and there is a story that goes with it. Some Palestinians were standing in line quietly for many hours along an Israeli roadblock, when one of them got fed up and started complaining. The soldiers did not like him making noise and ordered him not to step on the ground. He was forced to stand on a rock as seen in the photograph. We do not need more than this sketchy account to understand the humiliation inflicted on the man standing on the rock.

To degrade a human being to an utterly arbitrary will means that this human counts for nothing, and counting for nothing as human beings is the very essence of humiliation.

Indeed, the caption of the ad is “Humiliation.” To degrade a human being to an utterly arbitrary will means that this human counts for nothing, and counting for nothing as human beings is the very essence of humiliation.

Because we understand humiliation better than we understand the idea of positive human dignity, we should adopt negative politics: preventing humiliation rather than promoting the positive politics of promoting human dignity. But the priority of dealing with humiliation does not mean that the justification for respect for humans lies in their potential capacity to be victims of humiliation. The justification is that they are human and nothing else. So let us honor if we can the horizontal man, but without kitsch and without deification.