

International Development Ethics Association 2018 Conference
“MARGINALIZED PEOPLES, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND DEVELOPMENT ETHICS”

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Defending the threshold of human dignity in the anti-immigrant age.

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this conference, and a special thanks to the Office of the United Nations Human Rights Office, the U.S. Embassy, and UN Women for having provided the funding to make my travel here possible. And while on the topic of travel...

This unpleasant scene ([PowerPoint slide #1](#)) was an integral part of my childhood journeys by car. On a regular basis, my father would need to clean off the squashed bugs from the windshield. This was simply expected; we thought nothing of it. Today in America, removing the carcasses of dead insects from windshields is rarely required, but until someone pointed this out to me, I hadn't really noticed.

What had happened?

We don't yet know with any precision, at least in the United States. In Germany, however, where people more observant than me noticed a similar change in windshield debris, a scientific study was undertaken in several of their nature reserves. The findings are very unsettling: extrapolating from this data they have concluded that nearly three quarters of all flying insects in Germany have vanished in the space of just 25 years. When you stop to consider that insects constitute 2/3 of all life on this planet, this is no small matter. As summarized by one of the scientists on the German study, “We appear to be making vast tracts of land inhospitable to most forms of life, and are currently on course for ecological Armageddon. If we lose the insects then everything is going to collapse.”¹

It is my hope that the dissemination of these findings will ring appropriate alarm bells around the world, and that we will all scramble to take inventory of our insect populations. This drastic decline in their population, if substantiated on a widespread basis, may well indicate that we failed to think ahead to the likely consequences of the extensive use of pesticides and insecticides. Given how important insect life is to the integrity and sustainability of our overall ecology, we may be facing a genuine crisis. If so, how could we have failed to either anticipate

¹ Prof Dave Goulson of Sussex University, UK

such an outcome, or even to notice until now such a catastrophic decline in such a short span of years?

Failing to perceive extraordinary trends or to anticipate associated causal relationships and probable outcomes isn't limited to bugs. We have a “people problem” too which we are all aware of, yet which we continue to view as a short-term problem to be controlled or bottled up elsewhere: the growing global tide of refugees and asylum seekers sweeping into Europe, North America, Australia, Jordan, Lebanon, and many other countries ([PowerPoint slide #2](#)). Even though we are already seeing a refugee population numbering more than 63 million persons, only a relatively few persons are trying to look into the likely future consequences of not solving the problems that are giving rise to this vast relocation of populations, and only a few voices are raising the specter of similar Armageddon scenarios related to this very human crisis.

Even though this scale of human displacement is unprecedented in human history, it's far from being among our top priorities. Indeed, President Trump even enacted drastic cuts to humanitarian relief funding to assist such refugees, and is instead intent upon deporting hundreds of thousands of refugees now in the United States and erecting a vast wall along the southern border between the United States and Mexico to prevent most refugees from accessing safety and hope in my country. He offers no solutions to the root causes of this mass movement; he just wants it to stop.

What do a catastrophic decline in flying insects and a massive global refugee crisis have to do with development ethics? Quite a lot, actually, given that development ethics is closely linked to certain understandings of human nature. Let me offer three observations:

- 1) Humans are mostly short-term thinkers. ([PowerPoint slide #3](#)) We seem pretty inept at prioritizing issues that have no demonstrable short term negative impacts on the status quo, even if there exists compelling evidence that long term implications for not attending to such issues are very likely to be dire. Even when the consequences of certain foreseeable situations are clear, if they pose no immediate threat to our individual self-interest we generally chose to ignore them. Our self-interest is remarkably narrow; even though the evidence is overwhelming that the probable outcomes of such phenomena as increasing refugee flows, intensifying global economic inequalities, and global climate change left unaddressed now will adversely affect our own children and grandchildren in the years to come, we do little or nothing now to prevent such outcomes in the future. Our offspring will not look back kindly upon us.
- 2) Humans don't handle rapid changes well. ([PowerPoint slide #4](#)) Many people express consternation or bewilderment at the accelerating pace of change, complaining that things are happening much too quickly in our globalizing world. The very human reaction to so many rapid changes is to hunker down and cling to traditional values and

the politics that pledge to reinforce, defend, and conserve the status quo. We romanticize about the “good old days”, forgetting that such days were only good for a very privileged few.

- 3) Humans don't want to acknowledge that some things just take time. While we understand the logic, we simply do not want to accept that the moral underpinnings of civilization and development cohere and make sense only within a longer timeframe. (PowerPoint slide #5) Not only does development not happen within the 3-year development budgets we typically allocate domestically or as foreign aid, but the values, institutions and accomplishments of civilization take generations to evolve and deepen. That might explain why our professed shared commitment to universal human dignity is really more rhetorical and theoretical than tangible. We do a very poor job of legislating that human dignity be respected, since we know that it would take so long to transform the social norms needed to enforce such legislation.

So, what do bugs on the windshield and the rhetorical treatment of human dignity have to do with each other? My argument is that they are both illustrative of our failure to recognize and respond to existential values – the common values of our shared identity as human beings. These include such values as selfhood, autonomy, authenticity, freedom, equality, power for its own sake, and virtues for their own sake. These are all values that focus on individual uniqueness. Such values can and often are discussed outside of the context of human dignity, but discussing human dignity without reference to such values constitutes a very limited conversation.

One of the leading contemporary thinkers about universal human dignity is the emeritus professor of politics at Princeton University (or, as he prefers to self-identify, the “oncologist of politics”) George Kateb. Professor Kateb distinguishes existential values from moral values, defining the latter as having to do solely or principally with human suffering. His argument is that being made to suffer, physically or materially, is not conceptually the same wrong as being treated as if one is not human. In his view, which I support, we must first begin by laying claim to humanity – as captured in the concept of universal human dignity – as a condition worthy of respect. Only then we can move on to address suffering.

You will notice that I have not clarified my terms. I haven't yet said what “human dignity” is. (PowerPoint slide #6). Nor will I, since no consensus exists on a precise definition of dignity. That is both a curse and a blessing. It's a curse, in that we must endure the cacophony of not all being on the same page when we are discussing dignity. For some of us, dignity can be interpreted thinly as a person's status, demeanor, or rank. Alternatively, it can be linked to the roles which one fulfills (or fails to fulfill). For others, dignity is complicated, mysterious, even ineffable, yet inherent to the human condition and equally present within us all.

The blessing in forging ahead without benefit of a common definition of dignity is the anecdotal reality that every society already knows what it is. We all intuitively value this ill-defined thing known as dignity. Everywhere one goes, dignity is held in very high esteem, if perhaps only rhetorically or in some self-serving sense. We all know that dignity matters, even if we use very different words to try to say why.

George Kateb views dignity as exceptionally valuable; so much so that he considers that the label of “immorality” – as strongly negative as that condition is - just isn’t strong enough to capture the sense of “evil in the form of the effacement of human dignity”. This doesn’t mean that Kateb is unconcerned about the immorality of human suffering. After all, intense or sustained suffering constitutes an egregious assault on human dignity, sometimes to such an extent that the very possibility of the idea of human dignity is forced out of the mind of the suffering victim. Suffering matters, but our existence as dignified human beings matters more.

Kateb takes the position that human dignity exists universally ([PowerPoint slide #7](#)). Since it is the inherent birthright of each and every human being, it therefore ought to be recognized and respected instead of ignored or assaulted. A different view is asserted by the contemporary German philosopher Arnd Pollmann, who interprets human dignity as a fragile *potential* capability to lead a truly human life – a potential that has to be fulfilled and self-actualized by the persons in question, even if occasionally enduring precarious life conditions. Pollmann distances himself from Kateb by claiming that not all human beings already possess the same dignity. He tempers that provocative statement by quickly arguing that all human beings have exactly the same rights to the protection of their dignity – be it “potential” or robustly realized ([PowerPoint slide #8](#)).

Given the very different implications between “possessing” and “protecting” universal human dignity, the Kateb-Pollmann debate is theoretically important. Recognizing that this debate is happening in the absence of any credible global effort to respect such possession or protect such vulnerable potential however makes it something of a sideshow. As we all know, governments everywhere regularly employ the rhetoric of universal human dignity, but no government has made any significant, consistent progress in truly respecting this central existential principle of humanity.

The evidence of our failure to respect a threshold of human dignity – to place dignity (however defined – and there does exist a broad area of consensus among the prevailing definitions) as the point on the continuum below which we dare not go – is manifest when we look at the plight of refugees. For me, that is a daily occurrence linked to my close association with Kenya stretching back to 1979. I regularly hear by email from a community of marginalized refugees in northwestern Kenya at the Kakuma Refugee Camp ([PowerPoint slide #9](#)). Only a few have access to cellular phones, and they are the leaders among their peers and their connection to the world outside. These include such people ([PowerPoint slide #10](#)) as Kayando Joseph,

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Walusimbi Umar, Mbazira Moses, Nakawunde Benon, and Kamarah Kann. We know each other from the many years I have been active in Africa as a human rights activist and development practitioner. We also know each other because we share a common bond – we are all part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) community. That particular membership comes with an intensified degree of marginalization, set aside for LGBTQ refugees. At Kakuma they are currently languishing in a separate part of the camp, where they are currently trying to rebuild their modest shelters following the devastation from recent floods. They are hungry; the World Food Program has significantly cut the rations for all refugees (linked to financial cuts imposed by the Trump administration in the USA), and they now have inadequate food. Because of the violence inflicted upon them by other homophobic and transphobic camp residents who are not LGBTQ, they are unable to access any of the income-generating programs taking place in other parts of the camp that would enable them to earn some money to supplement their inadequate food supplies. Their situation is quite dire.

What is the solution for my gay, lesbian, and transgender friends who now “take refuge”, after a manner of speaking, at Kakuma? Their lives are on hold, their daily safety is in jeopardy, their futures are insecure, and their hopes and dreams are in disarray. They feel forgotten, abandoned, and disposable, and to a very large extent they are – at least to the people and governments who owe them a duty of care and respect. Given their status as LGBTQ persons, however, they face intensified marginalization, abuse, violence, and stigma. Their human rights are routinely abused, and their human dignity is simply not discussed – despite their efforts (aligned with Pollmann’s exhortations) strenuously to assert their self-respect and dignity. Where are these people situated along the “long arc of history that bends toward justice”, in the words made famous first by the 19th century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker and a century later by civil rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? (We might even be justified to ask in what direction are they moving along that arc?).

These refugees are running out of patience, and they are running out of time. They deserve to be treated as dignified human beings, but this is not their reality.

Establishing the logistical infrastructure and finding the resources to support teeming numbers of refugees and asylum seekers does take time. Time – and taking note of changes happening over time – are central to the human experience of progress. The sustainability of life as we know it, and – in terms of humanity anyway – as we have seen it embodied in societies trending toward justice, decency, care and compassion, respect for equality and fairness, and cosmopolitan awareness, is only properly perceived and evaluated over time. Some societies have certainly made reasonable progress over time in pursuit of that decency, respect and care, but most have not. The problems and challenges are growing, and for so many people who are now suffering, time is running out. This is tragic, and a profound moral dilemma, but in so many cases we haven’t really noticed. We’ve had other priorities.

There are some obvious analogies that we can learn from. Over twenty years ago, when I worked as a town and regional planner in the Philippines, I studied the situation in the mountain resort City of Baguio in Northern Luzon ([PowerPoint slide #11](#)). The data was clear; the rate of gastro-intestinal illnesses and the burden of diarrheal diseases were increasing sharply and had been for some time. The city officials even knew what was causing this growing public health hazard – Baguio had an antiquated, undersized, poorly maintained sewer system that covered very few of its houses. Most sewerage went straight into the ground, where it contaminated the water table. Still, Baguio was one of the three cities and towns in the Philippines with any kind of a sewer – and three out of more than 1,500 is an obvious problem. Even in the capital, Metro Manila, with a population approaching 13 million, less than 8% of households now have sewerage connections.

Mayors in the Philippines are elected for three-year terms. Building a sewer system is expensive, and is rarely completed in less than seven years. No mayor was going to be re-elected because she or he undertook a long term, expensive infrastructure project that was buried in the ground. The Filipino electorate casts their votes in response to a mayor achieving something inexpensive, highly visible, and immediate. No surprise, then, that Baguio’s sewage problem remains dire to this day, and negative health outcomes have vastly increased.

Systemic democratic governance failures notwithstanding, we know that human beings are certainly able to imagine a healthy environment, understand the need for safe and potable water, envision and plan a municipal sewerage system, and even make compelling arguments for its funding and construction. Still, when it comes to short term popular priorities, it doesn’t even make the list.

OK, I’ve gone from bugs to refugees to ground water quality. I am now going to take a bigger leap, with problematic connotations, from sewage back to human dignity. Or more specifically, I’m going to leap from our inability or unwillingness to mitigate and prevent very tangible public health threats, worrying declines in insect biomass, and a burgeoning refugee crisis, to our inability or unwillingness to follow through with what is arguably our most important moral commitment of all – recognizing and responding to universal human dignity. That’s a problem – for the bugs, for the refugees, for the sewerless, and for humanity itself.

So, what’s so important about human dignity?

The notion that human dignity is important is hardly new. After all, we find it taking pride of place – twice – in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([PowerPoint slide #12](#)). The first of the many “whereas” statements of the Preamble of that remarkable documents asserts: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...”, and then it shows up again in the very first sentence of Article 1: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should

act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”. It’s grand language, and I do not doubt the sincerity and virtuous intentions of those who authored these remarkable documents. Yet the question begs itself – if human dignity is rhetorically so important, why is it honored mostly in the breach?

Perhaps we human beings are not yet ready, morally and ethically, to grasp what it would mean in the long term to actually pursue policies and actions that are genuinely responsive to respecting universal human dignity. We are getting a small taste of this reality now arising out of the “Me Too” movement; suddenly and for the first time in human history women and girls are united and strong in pushing back against subjugation, objectification, infantilization, and other ways in which their dignity is not being recognized and respected. The long-term implications of where that gender equality movement might take us as human beings is barely comprehended – but perhaps in this case that may be a good thing. Bringing down the fortress of patriarchy will change so much, in ways we have yet to imagine, and we have barely begun that transformation.

What will it mean to each of us when and if the day comes when we actually honor the equal dignity of every refugee? The squalid and forlorn refugee camps will be gone, as they will no longer be needed. Once we decide that finding the solutions to the problems that force people to take the drastic decision to leave their homes is a genuine priority, there will be no refugees.

What will it mean to those who are currently stigmatized and denied their human rights simply because they love the “wrong” person, or know that the gender identity that they were assigned at birth is not who they authentically are? It will mean that we will learn that accepting our human diversity enriches our societies, expands our possibilities, and reinforces two of the most important values any of us hold: love, and authenticity to self.

We’re not even close to achieving that level of moral and ethical awareness. Our cultures and our economies are still premised on the belief that we can use other people as means to our ends, that exploitation is natural, and that altruism is but an externality. We still define our self-worth by the power we exert over others, and by the surplus resources we control – even while others endure extreme poverty, insecurity, and lack of services.

We can begin to raise humanity’s awareness of the significance of universal human dignity, however. In fact, we must begin, if we are not to end up like those disappeared insects mysteriously absent from our planet. We have no choice but to think in the long term. Instead of being helpless victims of rapid global change, we must make conscious and thoughtful decisions about what we value, and how to achieve and sustain that.

The starting point is to adopt and truly respect the threshold of universal human dignity, as made manifest in honoring human rights and empowering human capabilities. No one must be allowed to sink below that threshold.

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Even having the discussion of what that would mean would be a revelation. Transformational changes in social norms and values begins with such revelations. It's time to start.