

The Intersection Between Kantian Human Dignity and Ubuntu/Hunhu: A Critical Engagement with Oliver Sensen's Perspective

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Abstract

Human dignity is a central concept in moral, legal, and political discourse, often invoked as the foundation of rights and ethical treatment. Traditional interpretations of Kantian dignity emphasise its intrinsic worth, tied to rational autonomy. However, Oliver Sensen offers a nuanced view, contending that, for Kant, dignity should be understood as a relational property, arising from our moral relations rather than from internal capacities. Sensen argues that human dignity, in the Kantian sense, is not a quality possessed in degrees or based on individual traits, but is rooted in the moral status rational beings hold by virtue of their autonomy. Particularly, Sensen's conception of human dignity resonates with the classical understanding of Hunhu/Ubuntu in an African Ethical context. Ubuntu, a Southern African philosophical tradition, centres on the idea of personhood as inherently relational. It upholds values of mutual respect, shared responsibility, and ethical living within the community. In this worldview, human dignity is not a solitary possession but a quality nurtured through meaningful relationships, moral behaviour, and the recognition of each person's humanity. The guiding principle, 'I am because we are', captures this ethic, affirming that dignity flourishes through collective care and moral solidarity. It is therefore the aim of this paper to examine the relationship between Sensen's relational reading and Ubuntu in the African context. The paper will also consider the relevance of Sensen's understanding to contemporary African societies while looking at the significance of human dignity in contemporary moral thought.

Keywords: Human dignity, Ubuntu/ Hunhu, autonomy, human person, respect, value.

Introduction

In the first place, there is a controversial debate on Kant's conception of human dignity, which is dominated by arguments based on human dignity and the rationale of respecting a human person. The genesis of the debate stems from an isolated understanding of the Kantian definition of dignity in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Kant's statement to 'treat oneself and others never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end' means that whether someone is a man or woman, black

or white, rich or poor, he or she ought to be respected [Wood 2005:51]. One's acts or status, or position, should not determine respect or not. But punishment can be used as a tool to solicit and remind the murderer or a rapist of their moral obligation.

However, Kant's justification for respecting others is being read and understood differently. From such different interpretations and understanding, two schools of thought emerge: firstly, the most popular or common reading, as

attributed to scholars such as Paul Guyer, Herbert James Paton, Mary Gregor, Thomas E. Hill Jr, Allen W Wood, John Ladd, and Jerome B. Schneewind. The other school of thought is the traditional reading, which was pioneered by Oliver Sensen. Our stand is that the traditional understanding attempts to clearly and holistically understand Kant's argument on human dignity and views. Nevertheless, Oliver Sensen, a contemporary African moral philosopher, holds a different view that Kantian human dignity does not rest on ra-



Oliver Sensen

General understanding of the Kantian concept of dignity

tionality rather it's based on relationality. Thus, human dignity is not innate rather acquired because of human interaction between and among people. These sentiments are shared by the *Umnthu/Hunhu* African moral tradition. Before examining the points of convergence, the paper first outlines the foundational principles of Kant's concept of dignity.

In Kantian literature, there is a famous statement, 'the condition under which something alone can be an end in itself does not have merely a relative worth, i.e., a price, but rather an inner worth' [Wood 2005, 53]. This statement is popularly read as, dignity entails the human values that are the fountain of human rights and moral obligation to do what is right. Paul Guyer, for example, understands that Kant defines dignity as an absolute or intrinsic, or inner value that all human beings possess. The foundation of human

dignity is rationality and the autonomous nature of human beings [Wood 2005]. Guyer added that, when Kant says treating humanity as an end in itself, it means 'treating each human being as an autonomous agent capable of setting his or her ends both freely and yet in harmony with others' [Wood 2005:207]. Though we are moral and transcendental subjects, capable of legislating our means, hence becoming individualistic, we need to respect, protect, and preserve other people.

In the same vein, Jones [1995] argued that right is before good and right is before duty. That is, the goodness of a human being is determined by morally good behaviour or virtuous practice. We do good not because it is our human nature, but because we have a moral obligation to act that way. They are those moral acts that give a person a moral duty to do what respects humanity. Since a human being is an end in themselves, he/she ought to be treated not merely as a means but as an end in themselves [Wood 2005]. In other words, violations of hu-

man rights and immoral acts such as abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, wars, use of nuclear weapons are wrong because humanity is not valued but rather degraded. Humanity is used merely as a means to justify egoistic ends. Hence, Kant is popularly regarded as a value realist and a philosophical defender par excellence of the rights of persons and their equality [Ladd: xv]. Let us get someone who understands the concept of value (dignity) differently from the classical interpretation of the dignity concept, Oliver Sensen.



Oliver Sensen's understanding of Human Dignity

Oliver Sensen denies [2015:311] the contemporary understanding of human dignity. Sensen argued that, 'in the Kantian literature, there are few reflections on the ontological nature of this value'. Such a common or contemporary conception of dignity suggests that human dignity does not have an ontological value and is a non-relational property. In other words, the common understanding of dignity misunderstands Kant's conception of human dignity. Then, Sensen [2009] elucidates that a different account emerges if one takes into account all passages in which Kant uses the term dignity. That's the contemporary understanding of Kantian dignity originates from isolated readings of Kant's works and passages on dignity, a price, and humanity. It leaves many unresolved and unrestored gaps. So, if contemporary scholars understand the context, content, and link the passage(s), a new, different view emerges altogether. For instance, according to Wood,

“The practical necessity of acting in accordance with this principle, i.e., duty, does not rest at all on feelings, impulses, or inclinations, but merely on the relation of rational beings to one another, in which the will of one rational being must always at the same time be considered as universally legislative, because otherwise the rational being could not think of the other rational beings as ends in themselves. Reason thus refers every maxim of the will as universally legislative to every other will and also to every action toward itself, and this not for the sake of any other practical motive or future advantage, but from the idea of

the dignity of a rational being that obeys no law except that which at the same time it gives itself.” [Wood 2005:52]

This passage links autonomy, morality, and dignity. A morally good person stands for the Formula of Autonomy since it belongs to his or her dignity. Inclinations or selfish behaviours do not presuppose his acts. He or she obeys the law that one legislates for oneself. In other words, human dignity entails being a morally good-willed agent.

In addition, Kant's conception of human dignity and his justification to treat oneself and others can be read in very different ways [Sensen 2009]. The common interpretation of Kantian human dignity error to claim that the ground of human dignity is rationality and autonomy. Respect for humanity is not grounded in the value of human dignity; rather, it is more than that. Sensen [2013] argues that Kant does not have such a conception of value as referring to a metaphysical feature of being precious. He does not conceive of value statements that express that one ought to value something, but that value statements are a different way of saying what reason cognises as necessary: 'which reason independently of inclination cognises as practically necessary' [Wood 2009:29]. It figures out what human rationally conceives as good, but Kant does not ground morality on any value. He does not ground it on dignity and price. Rather, Kant uses an older (archaic) paradigm of dignity in which the term 'dignity' expresses sublimity, elevation, or that something is raised above or has a relational value property.

Sensen [2013] discovered three paradigms on the understanding of Kant's conception of human dignity. These paradigms are: archaic paradigm, traditional paradigm, and contemporary paradigm. The archaic paradigm is equivalent to the Stoic understanding of dignity. The archaic paradigm understanding of dignity is based on the ancient Roman use of the word *dignitas*. According to Griffin [2017:309], *dignitas* implies 'superiority over other orders'. Historically, *Dignitas* is the political concept that depicts high office or rank or position, such as being a king, a president or a minister. Sensen [2009] states that dignity is sublimity, which means an elevation or the highest elevation of something over something else. Dignity is rising above something, but the raised thing depends on which context the term might be used. For instance, in the Catholic church, the highest rank is the papacy. A pope has many benefits compared to cardinals, bishops, and others. Despite such privileges, a pope is expected to portray specific kinds of behaviours; otherwise, he may lose the position. So, he ought to rule the church according to canon. So, as the papacy is a high-ranking office, dignity is not an absolute value human beings possess, but one's elevation above other beings.

The second paradigm is traditional. According to Sensen [2009], the traditional paradigm originates from an archaic paradigm that all human beings have an elevated position because of a capacity to reason. Rationality differentiates human beings from animals. This entails that human beings are superior to other beings because of their possession of reason. That's, to be human is to use one's reason

appropriately. In addition, a human being has an obligation not to violate the rights of other beings; otherwise, he or she will no longer be a human being but an animal. The last paradigm is called contemporary, which denies that dignity has a relational value property [Sensen 2013]. This paradigm denies the archaic paradigm based on elevation but agrees with the traditional paradigm that human beings are absolutely incomparably and valuable or priceless. It also upholds the principle that good is before right and right to virtue. The goodness of a human being is determined by morality and morally good behaviour.

Sensen [2009] is convinced that Kant was influenced by the Stoic or archaic paradigm and the traditional paradigm. It means that human dignity entails having a role over nature by virtue of being an autonomous being. Human beings have a particular or unique privilege or right over any other animate or inanimate beings. So, what is raised above or elevated in the *Groundwork* when Kant writes ‘that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have merely a relative worth, i.e., a price, but rather an inner worth’, is morality [Wood 2005:53]. Kant does not mean that human dignity is an absolute inner value as a condition to respect or honour humanity. Rather, by virtue of being human, human beings are raised

above any other beings. Human beings are free to make choices and decisions about their goals and lives. For instance, no matter how much an animal is trained or conditioned, it cannot choose a state of life, position, or have a vision. Only a human being has that capacity and disposition due to rationality and freedom.

Further, there are two stages of dignity, which are: the initial stage, where one possesses reason or freedom, and the last stage, which is the proper use of these autonomous and rational capacities [Sensen 2013]. Human duty is the proper use of one’s reason or freedom through decision-making, reflection, and contemplation. There is a distinction between his Kantian interpretation and that of the contemporary paradigm. Firstly, on relational value property, he holds that dignity has a relational value property. It means that a human being is elevated or raised above other beings by virtue of a capacity and disposition of autonomy and rationality. However, to say that something is elevated does not necessitate invoking a value property or any normative implication [Sensen 2009]. For a being to have a normative implication, we need to further the argument.

Sensen [2013] holds that dignity is connected to duties, not rights. To justify these duties, human beings need to use the principle of rights,

the categorical imperative. Thus, a foundation of respect is not human nature, but morality. Sensen conceptualises that a categorical imperative is ‘the law of morality for how such an absolute command ... to ...act only in accordance with that maxim through which everyone can at the same time will that it become a universal law’ [Wood 2005:123]. We don’t have to universalise for fear of looking stupid or backward. One’s maxim could be internally consistent, although one would not want others to act on these maxims as well, one could be a well-functioning scoundrel (crook). A method of determining how moral an action is by testing its consistency without any contradiction. Hence, the categorical imperative compels an agent to treat others not merely as a means toward personal ends but rather as an end in themselves. To treat others as ends in themselves entails taking into account one’s feelings, needs, interests, or possessions; hence, it becomes a universal or moral law applicable to anyone in a similar situation, circumstance, condition, or space or time.

A categorical imperative is based on a priori or pure reason. That is, it is a transcendental command that is not borrowed from experience, acquired in the process of testing the consistency. The morality of that act is not judged by the consequences or results, or the fruits it shall produce. Morality

could be defined as acting from duty and for its sake. It means acting without any inclinations, law, expectations, desires, selfish reasons, no incentives, or common good or altruism, rather rationally. Duty is commitment, not affection, but also constraint. That is, an agent’s duty is to be virtuous [Wood 2005]. Sensen understands Kant’s view that the moral law to act from duty is necessary not to be a good and well-behaved person, but to be a person with virtues. The moral law is for perfect rational beings who are not influenced by inclinations and desires. However, we are both rational beings with inclinations.

The *ought* expression expresses what a human being wholly governed by reason would naturally do [Kant 2002:102]. What one ought to do is the morally right action merely out of respect for the moral law: ‘What is essential to any moral worth of action is that the moral law determines the will immediately and not mediated by an end’ [Kant 2002:102]. Humanity as an end in itself is not something that is the end given by reason; rather, a human being exists as an end in oneself (Wood 45). ‘End in itself’ is not primarily or in the first instance a normative notion, but what characterises humanity.

The concept, morality, or moral law is before good, and it is understood as Kant’s morality on a direct command of pure reason (a priori). According to Kant, ‘pure reason... gives (to the human being) a universal law which we call the moral law’ [Kant 2002:46]. This entails that moral law is a priori because of its necessity and universality, as Kant states that, ‘this principle of humanity... is not borrowed from experience... because of its universality...so that the principle must arise from pure reason’ [Wood 2005:49]. The imperative to respect others needs to be a priori too. Hence, if one is prompted to reason morally, one’s reason ‘with complete spontaneity... makes its own order according to ideas... according to which it even declares actions to be necessary’ [Kant 2002:128].

However, according to Sensen, Kant does not claim to spell out the mechanism of how and why reason prescribes this a priori law; ‘all human insight is at an end as soon as we have arrived at basic powers or basic faculties’ [Kant 2002:65]. But one can identify that it is based on reasoning and not a command of sensibility to necessarily be consistent or strictly universal. Kant said, ‘we can become aware of pure practical laws just as we are aware of pure theoretical principles, by attending to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us’ [Kant 2002:43]. For example, if

you are tempted to give false witness in a court, human reason has a capacity to inform you that the act is morally wrong. However, we cannot control our will and the moral law that describes how this will necessarily function. In so doing, universality leads to an ideal of the kingdom of ends.

In the kingdom of ends, all human beings treat themselves and others as ends but also as subject to its laws [Wood 2005]. In other words, individuals in the realm of ends act not in accordance with inclinations but rather in accordance with their rational nature and from duty. This is possible under the obligation of the supreme principle of morality, the categorical imperative. For example, serving a man who murdered your mother in a flat that is caught on fire is morally permissible. Acting out of goodwill because it is intrinsically good and not because of its consequences or desired ends, but summoning up all means insofar as they are in our control [Wood 2005]. Hence, by serving the criminal, the goodwill shall shine like a jewel. After a thorough examination of Oliver Sensen’s perspectives, one may ask: What insights do his reflections offer us? The following section engages this question with a critical response, unpacking the implications and contributions of his thought.

Reflections on Oliver Sensen's Views

We have found Sensen's interpretation and understanding very ideal to the respect of human rights in our contemporary world. In many countries and the world at large, the respect of human rights is grounded on the common understanding of Kant's human dignity. Human beings ought not to violate or abuse human rights because human beings are intrinsically dignified and equal [UN, Preamble]. It states that, to have a free, just, and peaceful world, human rights must be protected and not violated. However, there are many cases of human rights violations which includes, including human trafficking, rape, child forced marriages, civil wars, discrimination, racism, nepotism, and many more. Most probably, the problem is that few people are aware of the pure moral law (categorical imperative) which compels them to act morally. That they may not know that they ought to respect themselves and others because it is necessary and universal to be moral. This is what Sensen is advocating, that dignity is not within anyone, rather it is transcendental, but it depends on us to recognise and discover through the respect of others.

Further, Sensen's understanding promotes a synthetic analysis of philosophy; it emphasises the importance of context, content, and connection of passages and linkages of Kantian works. Munzel [1999:204] shared the view that the context and content of passages are paramount when reading or studying Kant. No wonder,

Mary J Gregor [1996] argued that when a teacher has only Groundwork to teach, he or she should insist that Kant did not mean what the text seems to say. However, one's students may conclude that one is merely giving his or her interpretation of Kant's theory. In the same vein, Boron and Schneewind shared the view that Groundwork is just a foundation; hence, reading it alone without other works is prone to error [Kant 95]. Therefore, when reading and studying Kant, the reader ought to understand the context, content, and connection of passages and texts. A different understanding emerges when one avoids interpreting Kant from a single or a few passages.

In addition, Sensen's interpretation reasonably compels man to act from duty and for its sake. This interpretation attempts to solve a dilemma of the rights of disabled people, infants, or unborn babies. Hence, dignity is the realisation and recognition of one's duty to respect everyone regardless of state. Sensen would then argue that the state and nature of a human being should not be a basis for moral debates. However, Sensen seems to state that human rational and autonomous natures compel man to do moral acts. Sensen thinks that reason issues its precepts unremittingly without thereby promising anything to the inclination [Todd 2002]. But the fact of being rational does not necessitate reasoning properly or having freedom to choose and do what is right. There are many cases in the con-

temporary world of inhumane or immoral acts caused by so-called rational and free beings. Some individuals justify their acts with valid and intelligible arguments, for instance, abortion due to ectopic pregnancy. Thus, his understanding requires more redefinition or modification, for example, on the connection between morality and duties, especially the duty to respect others, and Kant's conception of Humanity as ends in themselves.

At the heart of this discussion lies a compelling insight: the prevailing essentialist interpretation of Kant, where dignity is seen as an inherent value grounded in rational autonomy, is reimaged through Oliver Sensen's relational lens. Rather than viewing dignity as a fixed, metaphysical trait, Sensen presents it as a moral status bestowed through ethical relationships. Dignity, in this sense, is not something one possesses in isolation, but something realised through mutual recognition and moral engagement. It arises when rational agents treat one another as ends in themselves, guided by duty and the moral law. Thus, the depth of one's dignity is shaped by the quality of one's moral relations. This emphasis on relationality resonates profoundly with African moral philosophical thought, particularly the ethos of Ubuntu in Ndebele or Hunhu in Shona. Before delving into this intersection, we first explore the general concept of Ubuntu as articulated in existing literature.

General Discourse of Ubuntu / Hunhu Worldview

This paper will treat the terms *Ubuntu* (Zulu/Xhosa) or *Botho* (Sesotho), and *Hunhu* (Shona) as synonymous. The concept of Ubuntu is generally understood as the collection of moral values rooted in African folk traditions [Niekerk 2013]. Some of the *Ubuntu* values include human dignity, human life, obedience, hospitality, solidarity, interde-

pendence, caring, compassion, kindness, humility, empathy, friendliness, generosity, vulnerability, toughness in decision-making and communalism [Prozesky 2005; Molefi et al 2014]. *Ubuntu* promotes the practice of these values for the benefit of both individuals and the community. Those who do not adhere to these values are termed *chinyama* (an

animal), while those who do are called *Ubuntu* (a moral person). Therefore, it is both communally accepted and expected to be an Ubuntu rather than a *chinyama* [Mofolo 2024:40]. Having briefly discussed these concepts, it is right and just to brainstorm four philosophical approaches to *Ubuntu* as a moral theory.

Four Philosophical Approaches to Ubuntu as A Moral Theory

Scholars claim that *Ubuntu* is more than just a moral belief in the public discourse; they assert that it is 'an action-guiding moral theory' [Niekerk 2013]. This means that *Hunhu* describes and prescribes principles for actions in particular situations. To understand these principles, scholars employ philosophical approaches when studying *Ubuntu*, including Ethnophilosophy, Supernaturalism, Constructivism, and the Analytical approach.

Ethnophilosophy

Ethnophilosophy can be understood as a philosophy that is defined by mythologies, values, and other culturally structured and accepted methods through which people interpret and explain their experiences, often shared informally and passed down orally without methodical or critical examination [Ikuenobe 2004]. It implies that ethnophilosophy emerges from studying ethnic society and their traditions or customs. Usually, it is conducted by cultural anthropologists without applying systematic and critical analysis.

In the context of *Ubuntu*, ethnophilosophy focuses on understanding *Ubuntu* based on in-

igenous African human lived experiences, traditions, and worldviews. Ethnophilosophers such as Mogobe B. Ramose, Michael O. Eze, Johan Broodryk, and Mnyaka Mluleki, aim to return to the pre-colonial period when *Ubuntu* values were authentically lived and determined people's thoughts and words [Broodryk 2002].

Ethnophilosophy asserts that its claims cannot be criticised, investigated, verified or interrogated further, because a more detailed explanation would highlight something representationally or metaphorically akin to *Ubuntu*, yet discrete from African tradition [Niekerk 2013]. Likewise, ambiguities and vagueness associated with *Hunhu* are seen as stretched metaphors or errors incoherent and inconsistent with *Ubuntu*. Besides, *Ubuntu* is justified by referring to traditional or cultural slogans and maxims, for example, the IsiZulu maxim *muntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which translates to 'a person is a person because of or through others,' highlights the importance of shared identity and interconnectedness among people [Tutu 1999]. However, some philosophers criticise this approach for lacking methodological and critical rigour, overemphasising

tradition, and lacking spiritual reference to African ethics [Imafidon et al. 2022]. Consequently, other philosophers resort to or turn to supernaturalism.

Supernaturalism

Yvonne Patricia Chireau [2014] holds that supernaturalism entails various methods humans have employed to engage with the unseen forces of the invisible realm, including the entities that might act as intermediaries in these interactions. The supernaturalist approach to *Ubuntu* involves understanding it through 'spiritism [that beyond the physical world, there exists a spirit world that can be accessed through mediums] and Christian philosophical framework' [Niekerk 2014:34]. For instance, Bewaji and Ramose [2016:399] argue that 'Africans are in all things religious'. In the moral context, they invoke the divine entities to legitimise any action. In that way, immorality is considered abominable before God and lesser deities or gods [Wiredu 1990]. Therefore, a 'good life in a traditional African society is attained through close ties with religion, God, the ancestors and other humans' [Magesa 1997:99]. In so doing, *Ubuntu*

tu fosters harmony between the physical and the spiritual worlds. However, some philosophers criticise the supernaturalist approach for being ambiguous, vague, and lacking dialectical rigour [Spiegelberg 1951]. In response to these criticisms, some philosophers have turned to constructivism as an alternative approach to studying *Ubuntu*.

Constructivism

Richard Fox [2002:23] describes constructivism as ‘a metaphor for learning, likening the acquisition of knowledge to a process of building’. This means that a constructivist approach incorporates new knowledge into existing schemas. In this context of *Ubuntu*, constructivism views the *Ubuntu* initiative not as a review of existing value claims as a system, but rather as employing the language of *Ubuntu* to create a platform for discussing and forming a new, socially constructed value system [Niekerk 2014]. This approach encourages negotiations and dialogue. For example, Cornell and Nyoko advocate for a jurisprudence that embraces both Kantian dignity and *Ubuntu* [Cornell & Nyoko 2011]. No wonder Justice Yvonne Mokgoro suggests that African values from black-Africa can contribute to avoiding the death penalty, which she views as vengeance and incompatible with *Ubuntu* [Mokgoro 1998]. Hence, Mokgoro promotes reconciliation, social harmony, and friendliness. However, this approach is also criticised for lacking critical analysis, being

ambiguous, and overemphasising social context [Osborne 2014]. Alternatively, these philosophers adopt the analytical approach.

Analytical Approach

To analyse is to study something systematically and thoroughly by clarifying and interpreting it [Merriam-Webster Dictionary]. The analytical approach critically evaluates the concept of *Ubuntu*, and it identifies and resolves the fallacies of other philosophical approaches. These fallacies include, firstly, that the ethnophilosophical approach is unanimistic. Unanimism is an “illusion that all men and women in societies speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues” [Hountondji 1996]. In addition, immunity to criticism in ethnophilosophy is a political move that should not sway *Ubuntu* scholars [Niekerk 2013].

Secondly, the supernaturalistic approach is spiritistic. It makes the belief that a truly African philosophical viewpoint must inherently include references to spirits, deities, ancestors, or other metaphysical beings [Niekerk 2013]. Thirdly, the constructivist approach treats philosophical theories as elements of cultural traditions, rather than inventions of single authors or philosophers [Niekerk 2013]. Additionally, appealing to written works cannot resolve *Ubuntu* ambiguities, but rather reproduces them [Niekerk 2013]. Hence, the method of addressing these errors is solved in an analytical way that

gives the best, most elegant version of *Ubuntu* as a moral theory. Thaddeus Metz is a prominent figure in this approach. In his Relational Moral Theory, Metz would understand *Ubuntu* as ‘a function of communal relationship, a way that individuals can and should interact’ [2022: 2]. This means that *Ubuntu* values friendliness, and people ought to honour friendliness. Thus, the foundation of *Ubuntu* is not the actual relationship as the ultimate end or highest good, but the capacity to execute and maintain such relationships [Mofolo 2025:35]. At this point, we turn to examine how Oliver Sensen’s interpretation of Kantian human dignity aligns with or echoes the principles of *Ubuntu* within African philosophical discourse.

Sensen’s Relational Dignity Meets Ubuntu: A Philosophical Dialogue

Oliver Sensen’s relational conception of dignity resonates well with and can be deepened by the African ethic of *Ubuntu*. In the first place, Sensen views human dignity not as an intrinsic metaphysical property possessed by individuals, but as a status conferred through moral relations. It emerges when rational beings treat each other as ends in themselves, guided by duty and the moral law. In the same vein, *Ubuntu* entails that dignity is not self-contained but realised through communal recognition, mutual care, and ethical interdependence. Thus, although both reject atomistic individualism, Sensen’s Kantian dignity becomes visible in moral relations. Also, it insists that personhood and worth are constituted through community. That is to say, in both, dignity is relationally activated, not individually owned or possessed.

Secondly, Sensen [2013] states that respect arises from the categorical imperative, the duty to treat others as ends, not means. This duty is grounded in reason, not emotion or utility. In the same vein, *Ubuntu* argues that moral obligation flows from recognising the humanity of others, especially the vulnerable [Mvula 2017:83]. Ethical action is not just rational but responsive to suffering, joy, and shared humanity. That’s what *Ubuntu* adds affective and embodied dimensions to Sensen’s rational duty. It suggests that moral law is not only a priori but also experienced through empathy, solidarity, and communal rituals.

Thirdly, Sensen strongly holds that dignity involves elevation, being raised above other beings through rational autonomy and moral agency. Similarly, *Ubuntu* states that elevation is earned through ethical participation in community life, generosity, forgiveness, hospitality, and justice [2024]. In other words, *Ubuntu* reframes Sensen’s *elevation* not as superiority, but as moral maturity within a web of relationships. A dignified person uplifts others, not just one who reasons well.

Fourthly, Sensen would say that dignity is not based on traits or capacities, but on moral status; even those with limited autonomy deserve respect. In the same line, *Ubuntu* strongly claims that every person, regardless of ability, is indispensable to the community [Ajitoni 2024]. Inclusion is not charity but recognition of shared humanity. It implies that *Ubuntu* strengthens Sensen’s critique of capacity-based dignity. It offers a practical ethic of care where dignity is affirmed through belonging, not performance. In general, Oliver Sensen’s conception of dignity informs one of the African concepts of ethics: *Ubuntu*. Beyond Hunhu, Sensen’s ideas deepen our African philosophical grounding and expand normative reach. Let us explain.

Sensen's Relational Dignity and African Ethics: Points of Convergence

Sensen holds that dignity arises from moral relations, how we treat others as ends in themselves, and not from internal traits like autonomy or rationality alone. In the same vein, Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu [2025] states that this understanding informs our African Ethics, especially the concept of personhood and moral worth, which are earned and affirmed through communal participation, not automatically granted at birth. In this case, it reframes dignity as socially enacted and morally responsive, aligning with African views that emphasise relational personhood. It challenges Western liberal assumptions of dignity as fixed and individualistic, and instead supports dynamic, context-sensitive ethics.

In addition, Sensen puts that respect is grounded in duty, not in rights or metaphysical value. The categorical imperative compels us to act morally regardless of personal gain. Also, African Ethics emphasises obligations to the community, elders, ancestors, and the vulnerable. Rights are often secondary to responsibilities and harmony [Nicolaidis 2022]. This implies that Sensen's views strengthen African critiques of rights-based frameworks that neglect communal obligations. It supports justice systems that prioritise restoration, reconciliation, and moral duty, rather than punitive or entitlement-based models.

Sensen continues to argue that dignity is elevation, being raised above other beings through moral agency, not superiority. In African Ethics, moral excellence is shown through ubuntu virtues: compas-

sion, hospitality, forgiveness, and solidarity [Mofolo 2025]. This encourages ethical leadership and civic virtue as the basis for social justice. It affirms that dignity is not about status or power, but about how one uplifts others through moral action. Lastly, Sensen's view supports non-capacity-based dignity, vital for defending the rights of disabled persons, children, and marginalised groups. African ethics, when informed by relational dignity, can justify inclusive education, mental health support, and anti-discrimination laws not just on humanitarian grounds, but as moral imperatives. We therefore see that, although Kant did not make any reference to African ethics or Ubuntu, Oliver Sensen's sentiments portray such a picture. It then appeals to scholars, philosophers and moralists to consider adaptation and implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sensen probably might be right to interpret Kant's view that dignity has a relational value property and not an inner absolute value which is incomparable. Dignity exists with a realisation or recognition of moral law or a priori principle. The face of the other reminds us to discover a moral law that respects one's identity and dignity. Dignity is mirrored by others and exists with others. Human rationality and autonomy determine and guide us towards the discovery of moral obligation to respect oneself and others. Therefore, morality, which is authored by our rational will, ought to compel man to act from the duty of respecting oneself and, most importantly, others. The moral imperative to respect, honour, and protect others is deeply em-

bedded in the Southern African ethical tradition of *Ubuntu* or *Hunhu*. This worldview affirms that human beings do not exist in isolation, but are fundamentally interconnected. Nevertheless, this raises a critical question: do both *Ubuntu* and Oliver Sensen's interpretation of Kantian dignity regard personhood as inherently relational and rational? What, then, of individuals such as fetuses or those in comatose states who cannot actively demonstrate relational capacities? Are they still to be recognised as persons deserving dignity, honour, and moral regard? In light of these complex ethical considerations, this paper calls for further research to explore and respond to such pressing moral inquiries.

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