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What It Means to Have Nothing: Poverty and the Idea of Human Dignity in Nineteenth-Century Germany

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Abstract

This article explores the historical background of an issue that is central to present-day constitutional and human-rights discourse: the relationship between human dignity and the fight against poverty. It analyzes the role the idea of human dignity played in the reasoning of nineteenth-century German middle-class authors who were professionally engaged in social-reform debates, with a particular focus on debates about mendicancy. In these debates, notions of dignity were pervasive, and they provoked a troubling question: Is poverty a state of impaired dignity, and if yes, in which direction does causality point? Tracing the shifting perceptions from the enlightened belief in the self-perfectibility of man at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the rise of biomedical theories at its end, the article argues that concerns about human dignity gave the commitment to eradicate destitution an important impetus, yet with side effects that highlight the pitfalls of the dignity concept.

Keywords: human dignity; poverty; begging; welfare; social rights

Introduction

“Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority” proclaims the famous first article of the (West) German Basic Law, enacted in 1949 after the horrors of Nazism.¹ In present-day Germany, it is widely acknowledged that the constitutionally enshrined concept of human dignity underpins the basic rights that the Basic Law lists in the following articles. It is moreover generally acknowledged that further rights, not explicitly listed, derive from the foremost constitutional obligation of the state to respect and protect human dignity and that these include the social right to a decent standard of living. Poverty is an attack on human dignity, it is argued, and therefore a breach of the Basic Law. Hence, the Federal Constitutional Court has repeatedly ruled that some dispositions of the so-called Hartz IV laws on public assistance must be modified so as to ensure a “subsistence minimum that is in line with human dignity” (*menschenwürdiges Existenzminimum*).²

On the European and global levels, too, the concept of human dignity has gained prominence over the last seventy-five years. At the close of the Second World War, the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights invoked dignity coequally next to rights, the

¹ “Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany,” May 23, 1949 (https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html#p0019). This official English translation slightly deviates from the German original, which reads: “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar. Sie zu achten und zu schützen ist Verpflichtung aller staatlichen Gewalt” (my emphasis). In the following, translations from German sources are my own.

² Decisions dating from February 9, 2010, 1 BvL 1/09, and November 5, 2019, 1 BvL 7/16.

first vowing “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person”; the second asserting that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”³ Since then, the concept of human dignity has shifted its position to become the justifying ground of human rights: *Because of their dignity, humans have rights, including a right to the means necessary for a “dignified existence.”*⁴ In the context of the first UN Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997–2006), for instance, a UN paper on the “Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies” spoke of the “indignity of poverty” and stressed the right of all people to live and work in a manner “consistent with the dignity of the individual.”⁵

The idea of human dignity, it seems, has firmly established itself as the rationale of human rights, and it has been conducive for broadening the range of human rights to include a right to protection from poverty. With the remarkable global career of the concept, critical questions have also arisen. What is human dignity, and where does it come from? Is it an anthropological fact: an inherent quality that all humans possess and never lose, irrespective of what they do or experience? Is it a normative goal: a fragile human aspiration that must be fostered? Is human dignity itself a right: something that can legitimately be claimed from others? Is it perhaps even a subtle instrument of power: designed to impose a certain image of what it means to be human? In short, is this concept not just an elusive shibboleth?

Over the last decades, a vast interdisciplinary literature from law to theology and philosophy has struggled with such questions, and no end is in sight.⁶ This article will not continue the debate on a theoretical level. It aims to discuss notions of human dignity as a motive for the fight against poverty in the nineteenth century—the period that saw the beginning emergence of modern welfare states. Certainly, before the Second World War, the noun *human dignity* (*Menschenwürde*) was overall much less frequently used than it is today.⁷ It barely makes any appearance in the rich historiography on the origins of modern welfare policies, which usually locates motivations in pragmatic concerns revolving around social order, political stability, national integration, and economic efficiency.⁸ Indisputably, these were of paramount importance. Yet, concerns about human dignity arguably played a role too. This becomes more apparent when acknowledging that European welfare states grew out of an older fight against poverty and especially beggary as its most disturbing expression. Much of welfare-state historiography, and this is particularly true regarding Germany, identifies the birth of “modern” social policies with workers’ insurance and

³ “Charter of the United Nations,” June 26, 1945, Preamble; “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” December 10, 1948, Art. 1.

⁴ See Logi Gunnarsson, Ulrike Mürbe, and Norman Weiß, eds., *The Human Right to a Dignified Existence in an International Context: Legal and Philosophical Perspectives* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019).

⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Principles and Guidelines for a Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies” (HR/PUB/06/12, Geneva, 2006), 4, 24 (<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/PovertyStrategies.pdf>).

⁶ Among many others, Kurt Bayertz, “Die Idee der Menschenwürde: Probleme und Paradoxien,” *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 81 (1995): 465–81; Franz Josef Wetz, *Illusion Menschenwürde. Aufstieg und Fall eines Grundwerts* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005); Charles R. Beitz, “Human Dignity in the Theory of Human Rights: Nothing but a Phrase?,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 41 (2013): 259–90; Christopher McCrudden, ed., “In Pursuit of Human Dignity: An Introduction to Current Debates,” in *Understanding Human Dignity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–58; Marcus Düwell, “Human Dignity: Concepts, Discussions, Philosophical Perspectives,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Marcus Düwell, Jens Braarvig, Roger Brownsword, and Dietmar Mieth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 23–49; Andrea Sangiovanni, *Humanity without Dignity: Moral Equality, Respect, and Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁷ As a rough indicator, see the results given by Google’s Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams#>), accessed September 16, 2021.

⁸ For overviews on the German case, see Michael Stolleis, *Origins of the German Welfare State: Social Policy in Germany to 1945* (Berlin: Springer, 2013); Wolfgang Ayaß, Wilfried Rudloff, and Florian Tennstedt, *Sozialstaat im Werden*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2021).

labor legislation, and hence predominantly deals with these innovative, in the long run extremely successful preventive barriers against impoverishment, whereas addressing “traditional” poverty policies only as a hazy backdrop.⁹ Despite all its merits, this approach tends to underestimate how precarious the boundary between workers and the blatantly poor continued to be in the early phases of modern welfare states and how greatly the specter of mendicancy still haunted the minds of social reformers. Precisely this precarious boundary, I argue, provoked reflections on human dignity: here, the question of what kinds of poverty were intolerable arose most acutely. Since the late eighteenth century, a new, enlightened understanding of dignity that rested on a universalistic vision of man as an autonomous subject had become familiar among the educated classes. It fed a heightened sensitivity about what was “beneath human dignity,” which gave the commitment to eradicate misery a decisive drive in the nineteenth century, albeit with side effects that point to the pitfalls of the dignity concept.

My geographic scope is Germany, and I have to limit myself to a few examples in an attempt to illustrate overarching tendencies. I draw on sources produced by middle-class authors with practical expertise in poverty issues: philanthropists, poor-relief administrators, physicians, and the like. That means I will not reanalyze the canon of philosophical texts that the literature on human dignity usually quotes.¹⁰ Nor can this article take into account the self-expressions of the poor or of working-class activists. In the selected middle-class reflections on poverty, the word *Menschenwürde* rarely features verbatim. Nevertheless, terms evoking notions of dignity are pervasive. Indeed, in the German language space, discourses on poverty had a much closer relationship to the semantic field of dignity than, for instance, in the English-speaking world. This is partly because the pan-European differentiation between the accepted and the rejected poor, which the English named the “deserving” and the “undeserving,” was in German framed as *Würdigkeit*—a term intimately linked to dignity (*Würde*). Germans therefore constantly talked about the poor as *würdig* or *unwürdig* with a meaning that oscillated between (un)deserving and (un)dignified. They also talked about reproachable conduct or degrading experiences in words related to dignity (*unwürdig*, *würdelos*, *entwürdigend*). Although the traditional differentiation between the deserving and the undeserving poor gradually lost ground in the course of the nineteenth century, the adjective *menschenwürdig* gained currency. It was, and today still is, utilized mainly to denounce conditions deemed unfit for humans and translates as “consistent with human dignity” or, again, simply as “dignified.” All these dignity-related words used to talk about the poor provoked a troubling question: Is poverty a state of impaired dignity, and if yes, in which direction does causality point? Does misery erode the human qualities of individuals who were originally born free and equal, or do individuals fall into misery because of their lacking (sense of) human dignity?

This article traces shifting perceptions of the difficult relationship between poverty and dignity in four steps. The first section describes how observers of the early nineteenth century transformed the differentiation between the deserving and the undeserving poor by infusing it with an enlightened vision of human dignity. The second section focuses on an exemplary local controversy in the 1840s about the issue of whether certain practices of poor relief might harm the dignity of poor children in a way that would push them into beggary. The third section turns to the aftermaths of the economic crisis of the 1870s, when reflections on the interplay among work, dignity, and social rights started to become vibrant. The last section finally deals with the rise of medical interpretations of deviant poverty around the turn of the twentieth century, which massively challenged the idea of an equal human dignity.

⁹ Typical examples include Eckart Reidegeld, *Staatliche Sozialpolitik in Deutschland*, vol. 1, *Von den Ursprüngen bis zum Untergang des Kaiserreiches 1918*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006); Sandrine Kott, *Sozialstaat und Gesellschaft. Das deutsche Kaiserreich in Europa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

¹⁰ See, for example, Franz Josef Wetz, ed., *Texte zur Menschenwürde* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2011).

The Dignified and the Undignified Poor

In European history, there existed a deep-rooted tradition of ascribing to the poor a special proximity to God. Yet there also existed a tradition of denigrating the poor that became more dominant over the course of the early modern period. Both traditions combined to create a dichotomous image of poverty, concisely expressed by the long-lasting differentiation between the deserving and the undeserving poor. In German, the common word for deservingness was *Würdigkeit*, which evoked notions of dignity (*Würde*). This intriguing semantic closeness suggests that “dignity,” however understood, was a vital form of moral capital for the poor, one that supported claims to social inclusion. Demarcations between the deserving and the undeserving varied over time and space. However, the most notorious prototype of the undeserving poor was the beggar.

In the historiography on early modern poverty, the increasing ostracism of beggars and particularly of “sturdy” and vagrant beggars is a well-known theme.¹¹ Research has paid much less attention to the perceptions of mendicancy in the nineteenth century, although it continued to be a highly visible and intensely debated mass phenomenon.¹² While the early modern dichotomy between the deserving and the undeserving poor still stamped poverty discourses, it was, in the wake of the Enlightenment, dramatized by a new and idealistic vision of humankind. This vision theoretically included the poor as equals. Yet exactly because of its egalitarian claim, it raised expectations with regard to proper conduct.

An illustrative example of such a dramatized juxtaposition of the laudable and the damnable poor is Immanuel Wohlwill’s *Theory of Poor Relief*, published in 1834. Wohlwill, a Hamburg pedagogue of Jewish origins and enlightened convictions, emphasized that poverty per se was not contemptible and often even worthy of high respect:

Who obliges us more to sympathy and reverence than he who faces the inescapable blows of an erratic fate with manly steadiness, pious resignation and wise abstinence? What a dignified (*würdevoll*) appearance is the neediness simultaneously ennobled and keenly veiled by an indestructible love of honor, which will bear suffering rather than pity!

Who does not find uplifting the image of this devout old man who burns straw on his stove so that the rising smoke will not let the neighborhood suspect that he has nothing to cook and his want remains hidden.

Highly honorable is further the not small number of those who confront want with the natural resistance of work, effort, moderation and soberness.¹³

The truly dignified poor were, in short, those who deserved aid but declined to become pitiable paupers and rather veiled or resisted need by their own efforts. Such worthy manifestations of poverty Wohlwill sharply contrasted with “sunken, depraved, ignominious poverty” characterized by a lack or loss of moral self-control. The beggar represented the bottommost stage:

He who has rid himself of all shame and discipline on the way to impoverishment, whence should the virtue come to him for a dignified (*würdig*) self-defense against misfortune which ennoble only the noble? Must he not sink ever farther from step to step, weighed down by the burden of sin? By throwing off all sense of honor and forcing his way to everybody’s door and pocket, the actual beggar has so to speak emancipated

¹¹ See, for example, Ernst Schubert, “Der ‘starke Bettler.’ Das erste Opfer sozialer Typisierung um 1500,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 48 (2000): 869–93.

¹² On the social history of begging and vagrancy in nineteenth-century Germany, see Beate Althammer, *Vagabunden. Eine Geschichte von Armut, Bettel und Mobilität im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung, 1815–1933* (Essen: Klartext, 2017).

¹³ Immanuel Wohlwill, *Beiträge zur Theorie des Armenwesens* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1834), 80–81.

himself from the pressure of poverty. The complete dulling of all sense of pain amounts to painlessness. Where idleness has become a trade and begging a fraudulent art, all human feeling has died.¹⁴

Wohlwill's juxtaposition highlights how poverty interplayed with notions of dignity in an enlightened early nineteenth-century worldview, and it reveals a crucial tension in these notions. Primarily, he referred to dignity, alongside honor, virtue, and nobility, in order to hierarchize individual comportment. At the end, however, he implied that what ultimately upheld dignified comportment was "human feeling," a generic attribute of all humans, even though it might die in some. This tension between hierarchy and equality mirrored a general ambiguity in the meaning of dignity, which contained an elitist and a universal facet. Both facets had a long history that reached back to the Roman concept of *dignitas*.¹⁵

Throughout ancient, medieval, and early modern times, an elitist or aristocratic understanding of *dignitas* had dominated. It referred to the dignity deriving from high rank, public office, accomplished feats, or virtuous bearing and hence to a person's particular worthiness of respect. Nineteenth-century German encyclopedias usually still defined *Würde* in this sense, though pointing more to inner personal qualities than to outer social status:

Just as grace is the expression of a beautiful soul, so dignity is the expression of a sublime mind, of conscious and free control over sensual instincts and inclinations by the power of the moral will. While grace testifies to a calm, harmonious disposition and a sensitive heart, dignity testifies to independent strength that tames and moderates volition. Grace arouses delight and love, dignity however respect and reverence.¹⁶

In this definition, which strongly drew on Friedrich Schiller,¹⁷ dignity is clearly a hierarchical concept. It elevates particular individuals above the human average, and it grows, just as Wohlwill suggested, primarily out of moral self-control. Yet, this elitist understanding of individual dignity was not as disconnected from the notion of a generic dignity common to all humans as might appear at first glance.

At its core, the latter also reached back to classical antiquity and namely to Cicero, in whose writings some passages allude to a dignity of human nature that elevates men above animals. This strand of thought mingled with Judeo-Christian theology, which embedded it in the doctrine of divine creation. God created man in his own image and gave him an immortal soul: from here stems human dignity—a privilege over other creatures with utmost transcendental significance. In Renaissance thinking and in early modern natural law theory, the idea of a generic human dignity gained prominence and took a more this-worldly turn. Only with the Enlightenment, however, the composite noun *Menschenwürde* arose and experienced a first boom. By the turn of the nineteenth century, various contributors to the broad intellectual movement of Enlightenment philosophy, and most influentially Immanuel Kant, had formulated secularized interpretations of the concept that, instead of God's

¹⁴ Wohlwill, *Beiträge zur Theorie des Armenwesens*, 82. For a strikingly similar juxtaposition dating from 1809, see Sabine Veits-Falk, "Der Wandel des Begriffs Armut um 1800," in *Aktuelle Tendenzen der historischen Armutsforschung*, ed. Christoph Kühberger and Clemens Sedmak (Vienna: LIT, 2005), 15–43.

¹⁵ On the conceptual history, see Viktor Pöschl and Panajotis Kondylis, "Würde," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhard Koselleck, vol. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992), 637–77; Oliver Sensen, "Human Dignity in Historical Perspective: The Contemporary and Traditional Paradigms," *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, no. 1 (2011): 71–91; Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Jeremy Adler, "The Genealogy of 'Human Dignity': A New Perspective," *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 89, no. 1 (2020): 17–59.

¹⁶ "Würde," in *Brockhaus' Conversations-Lexikon. Allgemeine deutsche Real-Encyklopädie*, 13th ed., vol. 16 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1887), 770.

¹⁷ Friedrich Schiller, "Ueber Anmuth und Würde," *Neue Thalia* 3, no. 2 (1793): 115–230.

providence, emphasized the autonomy of the human person.¹⁸ Because humans possess reason and free will, they can morally direct themselves, and herein lies human dignity—a dignity that, according to the Kantian formula, should be respected by never treating humans as mere means, but always as ends in themselves. Although still rarely arguing with dignity, a similar figure of thought supported the claim of human rights, which the American and French Revolutions had popularized. As nineteenth-century encyclopedias explained, “Human rights are called the perpetual, inalienable rights to which humans are entitled by virtue of their nature that elevates them above the animal world. They are all based on the recognition of the individual person, without which neither rights nor obligations are conceivable.”¹⁹

Elitist and universal understandings of dignity were thus not mutually exclusive, and indeed, they often combined. Elevation above the instinct-driven animal world through the capacity for rational self-command and conscious choice was central to both. On the one hand, the ontological difference between humans and animals constituted human dignity, common to all humans and only humans. On the other hand, the degree of personal dignity a human possessed remained variable according to just how far individuals realized their human potential. Individuals could doubtlessly rise above the threshold that marked the boundary of humankind, and with the Enlightenment, the belief decisively gained ground that this ability did not depend on aristocratic birth or rank, but on universally pursuable self-development. The crucial question, however, is whether humans could also sink below the threshold. Could they lose the part of dignity called human dignity, and if yes, what did this mean for their humanness?

Even though the idea of dignity became more egalitarian at the turn of the nineteenth century, there certainly persisted a tendency to hold it as forfeitable. Loss could result from distressing circumstances, but blows of fate did not necessarily exculpate the individual. Human dignity did not primarily confer rights; foremost, it meant a moral responsibility to make good use of the gifts that God or nature had bestowed on humankind. This is what Wohlwill implied. Poverty, he conceded, endangered dignity because it might make people regress to base instincts of survival. Yet not everyone succumbed. Rather, misfortune revealed the true worth of a person; it ennobled the noble while others sank down from step to step. Beggars had sunk the furthest. In Wohlwill’s perception, only the extinction of all human feeling—that is, the feeling of human dignity—could explain the beggar’s blatant display of misery.

Wohlwill consistently spoke of the poor in the singular masculine form (*der Arme, der Bettler*). This was far from unusual. Throughout the nineteenth century, German texts of all sorts showed a preference for the singular masculine form, and this included writings on poverty, despite the evident fact that females were no less affected. Generally, we must assume that texts grammatically speaking of men also meant women to some extent. In the case of reflections on dignity, however, the male formulation followed an inner logic. Both in its elitist and in its universal meaning, dignity was not only an anthropocentric but a thoroughly androcentric concept, modeled on the civilized adult male. God created man, Adam, in his image and added Eve only on second thought. Man stood above the rest of nature because of his rational capacities, whose equal incidence in women scores of thinkers and lawmakers denied well into the twentieth century.²⁰ Women, that implied, did not participate in dignity the same way as men did. Regarding deservingness of relief, this

¹⁸ Oliver Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011); Stefanie Buchenau, “Bestimmung und Perfektibilität. Menschenwürde in der Aufklärung,” in *Menschenwürde: Eine philosophische Debatte über Dimensionen ihrer Kontingenz*, ed. Mario Brandhorst and Eva Weber-Guskar (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2017), 178–205.

¹⁹ “Menschenrechte,” in *Brockhaus’ Conversations-Lexikon: Allgemeine deutsche Real-Encyclopädie*, 13th ed., vol. 11 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1885), 624. On the founding moments of human rights discourse, see Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007).

²⁰ For a panorama of the shifting notions on the boundaries of full humanity, see Joanna Bourke, *What It Means to Be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2011).

paradoxically privileged them. Women were not expected to be fully autonomous; they were expected to be dependent on fathers and husbands, and in the absence of male support, society had to step in. Primarily widows and orphans were the prototypical innocent poor who did not have to feel ashamed of their helplessness. If society failed to step in, even asking for alms seemed more forgivable in the case of forsaken women. For them, the main danger was forfeiting chastity, not dignity. For men, by contrast, begging from others had to end with giving up the essence of humanness, as Wohlwill suggested.

This perception of mendicancy was not completely new but reinterpreted at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the Old Regime, each estate and rank had had its place in the social order, and for each, different codes of conduct had applied. Able-bodied and roaming beggars suffered severe repression at times; but the local poor were in many places allowed and even encouraged to make their living by collecting alms. Especially in Catholic regions, where almsgiving still had an important religious function, beggars occupied a defined role with its own value. For enlightened eyes, however, they were an irritating sight that clashed with the ideal of man as an autonomous and self-respecting being destined to strive for perfection. Similar to the “emaciated slave” who “only knows animalistic affects,”²¹ the beggar appeared to have dropped beneath the threshold of true humanity yet without the excuse of external subjugation. Ultimately, the indignation that speaks from Wohlwill’s text was a consequence of the new European egalitarianism. Since all men were born free and even the poorest could aspire to realize their dignity, mendicancy became particularly outrageous.

Indignation about the beggar’s self-degradation continued to stamp writings on poverty throughout the nineteenth century and echoes up until today. But indignation was not enough: for social reformers the beggar’s disconcerting otherness posed practical challenges. Foremost, there was the challenge of character education. If a sense of dignity was so decisive for living like a true human, then society had, at the very least, an obligation not to destroy this potential in vulnerable pauper children.

Poor Children into Beggars

In early modern Europe, it had been a widespread practice that the poor took part in the funerals of wealthier people, praying for their souls and receiving alms in return for this religious service. Partly they had done so on their own account, partly as participants in organized rituals. Especially the children from foundling hospitals, orphanages, and pauper schools often paraded collectively at funerals as a method of fundraising for their institutions. Although mainly a Catholic tradition, some Protestant towns knew it too.²² By the early nineteenth century, it had been abolished in many regions. In others, it continued or was even reinvented, as was the case in Aachen, a predominantly Catholic industrial city near the western Prussian border. The local orphanage and poorhouse regularly sent their inmates to accompany funeral processions and requiems, for which the families of the deceased paid a fixed amount. In the 1840s, however, the practice became a bone of contention between the municipality and the Prussian district government.

The dispute centered on the question of whether sending paupers to funerals in return for money was something that came close to begging. Reform-minded senior officials of the district government denounced the arrangement as degrading for the poor because it turned them into objects for rent, misused them as a means to extort alms, and exhibited them in an embarrassing spectacle. This was bad enough for the aged inmates of the poorhouse who had to drag themselves through the city in spite of their infirmities, but it was

²¹ Georg Forster, *Über die Beziehung der Staatskunst auf das Glück der Menschheit [1794] und andere Schriften*, ed. Wolfgang Rödel (Frankfurt: Insel, 1966), 141.

²² Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005), 118–19. On the comparable implications of early modern pauper badges, see Steve Hindle, “Dependency, Shame and Belonging: Badging the Deserving Poor, c. 1550–1750,” *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (2004): 6–35.

fatal for orphaned and abandoned children. For them, the district government summarized in a long memorandum, the constant participation in funeral rites was a drudging routine that curtailed school attendance, compromised their physical health, and, above all, ruined their personal development. Institutionalized children were at risk anyway because they lacked a family, “this basic source of all better human feelings and all honorable striving,” and the funeral services worsened their prospects by dulling valuable emotions such as compassion and arousing negative ones instead:

This happens indisputably when these children, who, because they are cut off from the natural elements of life, its joys and freedoms . . . , feel a deep pauperization of their existence, are displayed every day anew in their misfortune, their desolation and poverty to the public and when relentlessly onerous services are demanded from them that are spared all other children. Here gratitude for the received care . . . is turned into bitterness, hard-heartedness, hostility to humankind and society. Here the last remnants of the sense of honor and shame are destroyed and, finally, a crude beggarly attitude dominates the young soul, as the practice in question is nothing but a modified collection of alms.²³

True religiosity, the memorandum continued, suffered harm too. By constantly forcing them to recite prayers in processions and to kneel in churches, the children were accustomed to sanctimonious dissimulation and mechanical loafing. The results were obvious to the district government. Not only did the orphanage children, “in their depressed physical and mental character, typologically resemble convicts”; they moreover tended to become outcasts: “If a chronicle was written about all the former pupils and their later careers, it would have to descend into the abysses of our proletariat.”²⁴

The municipal poor relief board, on the other side, strenuously denied the allegation that sending out orderly rows of cleanly dressed children to accompany funerals had anything to do with begging. They defended the practice as “an old pious tradition” that the “vast majority” of the city’s inhabitants appreciated because it made an “edifying,” and not an “embarrassing” impression, while usefully contributing to the subsistence of the poor.²⁵ Because religion was the basis of a proper education, praying in public would certainly not subvert the personal development or the sense of honor of participating children. Rather, the board claimed, these rites helped the children to become confident Christians.

Though none of the many documents written in the course of the struggle explicitly used the word, it can be read as a paradigmatic contest between traditional Christian and enlightened notions of human dignity. The poor relief board was defending an estate-based concept of society. The public parading of paupers confirmed that these were a recognized and even valuable part of the community, but that their subaltern position obliged them to humble services for the splendor and salvation of the wealthy who were maintaining them. This is precisely what upset the district officials. In a Kantian line of argument, they criticized that the parades reduced the paupers to mere means, with no respect for their autonomous personhood. They insisted that poor children deserved the same consideration as their more fortunate peers, so that they would become self-respecting individuals who felt themselves equal to their fellow citizens. With the funeral rites, Aachen was effecting the opposite, the district government contended: these amounted to a disguised revival of the alms-business by which the Catholic Church had generated multitudes of cringing beggars in former centuries.

²³ Landeshauptarchiv Koblenz (LHAK), 403, no. 7426, 47–84: Aachen district government to governor of the Rhine Province, February 29, 1852, quotes 61, 64–65.

²⁴ LHAK, 403, no. 7426, 74, 54.

²⁵ LHAK, 403, no. 7426, 15–20: Poor relief board to governor of the Rhine Province, January 12, 1852, quotes 16–17.

It would be too simple to declare the Aachen conflict a struggle between Protestants and Catholics. Many local citizens sided with the Prussian officials, and the president of the district government was himself a Catholic. Nor was it a dispute about the evaluation of begging in a narrower sense. Like in most European countries, individually asking for alms on the streets or from door to door was a punishable offense in nineteenth-century Prussia, and although law enforcement was far from perfect, all local authorities agreed that this kind of begging should be suppressed. The Aachen poor relief board was indeed quite dedicated to the fight against freelance beggars, and even the most zealous local Catholics shared the axiom that such dissolute people forfeited their moral deservingness. Chaplain Josef Istas, for example, a champion of Christian charity, declared that he would “never ever” allow “professional” beggars to benefit from the donations collected in his parish.²⁶ Controversial was not the condemnation of actual beggars, but the question of whether certain poor relief practices produced beggarly characters. After ten years of quarrelling, the district government won. In March 1852, the governor of the Rhine Province confirmed that the use of pauper children—not, however, of adult poorhouse inmates—for funeral services had to stop.²⁷

Alms, Work, and Social Rights

Children accustomed to begging were a matter of special concern to nineteenth-century social reformers because their personalities seemed highly formable, or rather, deformable. Asking for alms, as one author put it, planted in the child’s soul “hypocrisy and self-degradation on the one hand, egoism and envy on the other.”²⁸ As the century proceeded, foci of attention shifted, however. With accelerating industrialization, poverty-related discourses became much broader, and a main strand turned away from the very poor to the demands of industrial workers. Simultaneously, the numbers of begging children declined. Whereas children, together with women and aged paupers, had constituted a substantial part of the beggars apprehended during the first half of the century, their share rapidly shrank thereafter, as police and court records from many German and other European regions show.²⁹ For a while, there seemed to be hope that begging as such would peter out thanks to rising living standards, but this hope proved premature. In the wake of the severe economic crisis that began with the crash of 1873, a new wave of beggars came over Germany, provoking an agitated public and expert debate now at the national level of the unified German Empire. In contrast to the early nineteenth century, adult roaming men occupied center stage. Anxiety about the so-called “vagabond question” peaked in the early 1880s, but it remained a major issue within the wider field of the “social question” even after the economy had started to boom again.

In texts on the vagabond question from the 1880s, the assumption that mendicancy shattered the human potential for upright autonomy continued to be a leitmotif. Officials and philanthropists regularly described it as “dishonoring and demoralizing,”³⁰ as fatal for the sense of shame and self-respect. To resort to begging meant to “give up searching for self-earned bread” and instead to scrounge “crumbs from others’ tables” through “self-humiliation.”³¹ Such an attitude contradicted human nature, as many implied. Therefore, overcoming original aversion marked a watershed: “Real ruin only begins when people have become morally so insensitive that they do not feel ashamed of begging anymore,

²⁶ Sermon from 1841, printed in Erwin Gatz, “Kaplan Josef Istas und der Aachener Karitaskreis,” *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter* 36 (1972): 207–28, quote 228.

²⁷ LHAK, 403, no. 7426, 41: Governor of the Rhine Province to Aachen poor relief board, March 13, 1852.

²⁸ Paul Chuchul, *Zum Kampf gegen Landstreicher und Bettler* (Kassel: Wigand, 1881), 29.

²⁹ Beate Althammer, “Roaming Men, Sedentary Women? The Gendering of Vagrancy Offenses in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” *Journal of Social History* 51 (2018): 736–59.

³⁰ Rudolf Elvers, *Zur Vagabondenfrage* (Berlin: Kortkamp, 1882), 11.

³¹ August Lammers, *Die Bettel-Plage* (Berlin: Simion, 1879), 3.

that they do not want to work anymore, and then fall completely into the most miserable state of moral vagrancy.”³² In this state, most commentators believed, all barriers broke down. Beggary inevitably led to falseness, dissoluteness, and the suffocation of all aspirations to turn around.

Many texts of the 1880s used the words sinking or drowning to illustrate this descent. What pulled beggars down was termed a “flood” or a “stream to perdition,” and what gathered at the bottom a “swamp,” where weeds and sickness thrived. Such metaphors suggested that people who had succumbed to mendicancy fell into a mode of being almost not human anymore. They “vegetated” in the “swamp of vagabondage,” as one author asserted.³³ Another spoke of a loss of “moral individuality,” a state of “indolence,” “indifference,” and “animalization” (*Vertierung*).³⁴ Beggars sank so low, another author claimed, that they settled for “an existence barely consistent with human dignity” (*einer kaum menschenwürdigen Existenz*).³⁵

The notion of a generic human dignity clearly flashes up in such formulations, most explicitly in the expression *menschenwürdig*, which gained currency in the second half of the nineteenth century. It served to target abject conditions that seemed beneath human dignity and hence urgently needed reform. The literature on the history of the human dignity concept usually emphasizes its emancipatory thrust as a slogan that made claims on behalf of the poor. An oft-quoted example is Ferdinand Lassalle’s Workers’ Program from 1862, which declared that the working classes could legitimately demand support from the state in their quest for “an existence truly consistent with human dignity” (*einem wahrhaft menschenwürdigen Dasein*).³⁶ Yet the expression was a double-edged sword. Like in the quoted texts on beggary, it was wieldable also against the poor because of their failings. Even in the emancipatory usage, the demand for a future dignified existence easily insinuated that, at present, the poor could not feel and behave like humans. In fact, countless early socialist tracts drastically depicted the alleged brutishness of proletarians under the existing industrial capitalism. Friedrich Engels’s report on the slums of Manchester is a well-known case. In such an environment, he declared, wavering between pity and disgust, only a “dehumanized (*entmenschte*)” race, “intellectually and morally degraded (*herabgewürdigt*) to bestiality,” could feel at home.³⁷ This rhetoric evoked similarly othering images as middle-class laments about the animalization of vagabonds.

Middle-class commentators on the vagabond question mostly had no socialist sympathies, but the effects of economic processes on working-class people appalled them too, and their discourse reflected a new awareness of social responsibility. Why did so many men get onto the slippery slope of begging? A deficient education in childhood had been one main explanation since the Enlightenment. Dire need was also widely acknowledged as a trigger, and especially unemployment became a new major concern with the economic crisis of the 1870s. Scores of texts from this period highlighted the shortcomings of public poor relief. Municipalities were legally obliged to assist every destitute person, but in practice, they largely excluded able-bodied single men, thus forcing many unemployed to set out in search of a new job and to beg if a new job did not show up quickly. In order to save the masses of penniless work-seekers wandering across Germany from drowning in the swamp of mendicancy, charity organizations in cooperation with public authorities created new networks of assistance in the 1880s. These were coordinated under the name *Wandererfürsorge* (Wayfarers’ Aid). The labor stations (*Wanderarbeitsstätten*) and worker colonies (*Arbeiterkolonien*) operated

³² *Verhandlungen des Landtages, Haus der Abgeordneten* (1882–83), November 28, 1882, 174.

³³ A. de la Chevallerie, *Zur Bekämpfung der Bettelei und Vagabondage* (Münster: Schöningh, 1882), 18.

³⁴ Karl Braun, *Die Vagabunden-Frage* (Berlin: Simion, 1883), 6, 10.

³⁵ Chuchul, *Zum Kampf gegen Landstreicher und Bettler*, 7.

³⁶ Ferdinand Lassalle, *Arbeiter-Programm: über den besonderen Zusammenhang der gegenwärtigen Geschichtsperiode mit der Idee des Arbeiterstandes*, ed. Eduard Bernstein (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1920 [1862]), 26.

³⁷ Friedrich Engels, “Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz, 1957 [1845]), 225–506, quote 295.

by Wayfarers' Aid offered short-term shelter and meals to itinerant unemployed adult men, but only in return for work. To provide work instead of alms was a core idea behind this welfare movement. Its supporters advocated that work was the foundation of self-respect and hence the best prevention against depravity: "Let us conserve this dignity in man (*Würde im Menschen*) and let us offer him our hand in time, so that he is not first forced to go astray."³⁸

The establishment of Wayfarers' Aid coincided with the birth of the first nationwide compulsory workers' insurance schemes against the risks of sickness, accident, invalidity, and old age. During the controversial parliamentary debates that preceded the passing of these pioneering insurance laws in the 1880s, the role of dignity also surfaced. Notably, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was the one who most clearly enunciated that lack of social protection humiliated workers and therefore alienated them from society. Insurance, Bismarck declared, would heal this damage by strengthening the "feeling of human dignity" (*Gefühl menschlicher Würde*) in even the poorest German because he would "no longer be left without rights, as a pure pauper."³⁹ Bismarck went even further. Workers, he proclaimed in the Reichstag, should not only know themselves to be protected when sick or old; they should have a "right to work" as long as they were healthy.⁴⁰ This statement caused quite a sensation. The slogan of a right to work had long been associated with revolutionary upheaval, specifically with the bloody riots of 1848 in France. Like the idea of social rights in general, both liberals and conservatives had always rejected it.⁴¹ Of course, the avowed anti-socialist chancellor was no friend of revolution. On the contrary, he wanted to pacify and immunize workers against socialist agitation. Granting material protection and even social rights was, as he realized, actually a conservative strategy to stabilize society. Moreover, social rights imply obligations, primarily the obligation to work and pay contributions, thus entrenching the distinction between poor workers and poor idlers. Nevertheless, Bismarck's statements demonstrate that the link between human dignity and social rights was gaining recognition, even in the mind of a Prussian *Junker*.

Although the proposal of a right to work found little backing at this time, the insurance schemes against the risks of losing the physical ability to work were soon widely acclaimed. One standard argument in their favor was that they gave workers a right to self-earned benefits, whereas poor relief branded them as paupers. By the turn of the century, welfare experts generally took workers' abhorrence of poor relief for granted and endorsed the view that social policies must respect these sentiments. Emil Münsterberg, influential director of the Berlin poor relief board, for example, underscored that the "concept of poor relief in the traditional sense remains strange to the workers' program, the topmost principle of which is self-help: not charity but justice; not a plea but a claim."⁴²

It is unclear to what extent the needy, be they workers or not, actually detested poor relief. Historical research on their perceptions in the German context, where *outdoor relief* (at home) dominated, is quite sparse.⁴³ Middle-class observers, however, were sure that asking for relief had nearly the same implications as begging. That is, moral deservingness of assistance was not enough to maintain one's full dignity, as Wohlwill had already

³⁸ J. Jagielski, *Die Ueberhandnahme der Bettelei und ihre Bekämpfung*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1885), 22.

³⁹ *Verhandlungen des Reichstags* (1881), April 2, 1881, 713.

⁴⁰ *Verhandlungen des Reichstags* (1884), May 9, 1884, 481.

⁴¹ On the not-well-studied evolution of the idea of social rights from the French Revolution onward, see Eckart Pankoke, *Die Arbeitsfrage* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), 56–100; Gregory Claeys, "Socialism and the Language of Rights: The Origins and Implications of Economic Rights," in *Revisiting the Origins of Human Rights*, ed. Pamela Slotte and Miia Halme-Toumisaari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 206–36; Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018), 12–40.

⁴² Emil Münsterberg, "Das Problem der Armut," *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik* 83 (1904): 577–91, quote 581.

⁴³ See, however, Katrin Marx, *Armut und Fürsorge auf dem Land. Vom Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bis 1933* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008); David F. Crew, *Germans on Welfare: From Weimar to Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

suggested. Rather, pauper dependency in itself harmed the autonomous subject status. At the turn of the twentieth century, the sociologist Georg Simmel pondered this problem theoretically. Paupers, he noted, were forced into an asymmetrical relationship: the granted assistance marked them as nothing but “poor” and hence as “not-equals.” Simmel reckoned that their subordination could and should be overcome by acknowledging a human right to relief, which belonged in the same category as the right to work and the right to existence. “The depression, the humiliation, the downgrading of the pauper through alms will ease off for him insofar as these are granted not out of charity, a sense of duty, or practical considerations but because he has a right to claim them.”⁴⁴

Despite such theorizing, most policymakers and welfare experts rejected a right to relief just as vigorously as a right to work well into the twentieth century. According to prevailing opinion, neither natural law nor positive law supported the idea. Poor relief was a public duty, not a right, and society provided it not primarily for the sake of the needy individual, but in the public interest.⁴⁵ Many believed that poor relief simply had to be humiliating in order to deter all but the desperately indigent. Some, among them Münsterberg, pointed to more complex socio-psychological mechanisms. Similar to Simmel, Münsterberg analyzed pauperism in the light of relationships of exchange. Like private almsgiving, he argued, poor relief was at core a unilateral gift. Neither beggars nor paupers could return anything, except for imagined goods such as prayers, and the absence of reciprocity inevitably degraded them. The fundamental problem was that they stood outside the market exchanges from which members of modern society derive appreciation. Moreover, without balancing reciprocity, they always received too little, which embittered them, or too much, which lured them into permanent dependency.⁴⁶ Contrary to Simmel, Münsterberg predicted that declaring poor relief a right would make no difference. The only way out was to replace unilateral gifts by self-earned social benefits as far as possible.

For leading secular welfare experts of the late nineteenth century, deservingness was expressly not the point anymore. What united beggars and paupers was that they constituted the “uneconomic elements” of society, regardless of their moral or other personal qualities,⁴⁷ and public assistance had to intervene according to objective criteria of need. This was, however, opposed by Christian and particularly Catholic charities. Acting on a voluntary basis, they remained free to decide who deserved what kind of aid, and they preached that the value of charity rested upon such discrimination. Much more stoutly than secular welfare experts, they rejected an approach based on individual entitlements. The *Kirchenlexikon*, for instance, which recorded the doctrine of the German Catholic hierarchy, still condemned statutory poor relief altogether in the 1880s because a public obligation to assist irrespective of deservingness came close to stipulating a claimable right: “One should not ignore that with state-enforced almsgiving a very dangerous principle, namely the communist-socialist principle, springs up. This is the concretized idea of a right of the poor to the property of their fellow citizens on the one hand, and to work provided by the state on the other.”⁴⁸ German Catholics did not totally reject the concept of civil rights and liberties, but the notion of social rights was even further beyond their understanding of a just society than it was beyond the classical liberal human rights catalogue. God created man in his own image and thus bestowed him with dignity, but herefrom no right to earthly

⁴⁴ Georg Simmel, “Der Arme,” in *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908), 454–93, quote 456.

⁴⁵ See the articles on “Armenwesen,” in *Staats-Lexikon oder Encyclopädie der Staatswissenschaften*, vol. 2 (Altona: Hammerich, 1835), 11–12, 16–17, and in *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften*, vol. 1 (Jena: Fischer, 1890), 822–23.

⁴⁶ Münsterberg, “Das Problem der Armut,” 583.

⁴⁷ Christian J. Klumker, “Zur Theorie der Armut,” *Zeitschrift für Volkswirtschaft, Sozialpolitik und Verwaltung* 19, no. 1 (1910): 1–25.

⁴⁸ “Armenpflege,” in *Wetzer und Welte’s Kirchenlexikon oder Encyclopädie der katholischen Theologie und ihrer Hilfswissenschaften*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1882), 1371.

comforts followed. On the contrary, what followed was hard work appropriate to one's station, voluntary charity, and resignation to God's will.

Protestants were less hostile toward state intervention in poor relief, but they too opposed the idea of social rights. The Lutheran pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, a leading champion of Wayfarers' Aid, for example, was unequivocal about his rejection of a right to work. Providing work for the unemployed was a charitable duty, but legal recognition of a right to work would end up producing an "idlers' state," he claimed.⁴⁹ Bodelschwingh described destitute wayfarers as poor pilgrims and fellow brothers whom Christians had to treat lovingly in remembrance of Jesus's words: "I was a visitor, and you sheltered me."⁵⁰ Yet, he did not trust their resilience against the fatal attraction of the "pestiferous swamp" of vagrancy.⁵¹ By offering work, he wanted to rebuild their battered respectability, but also to test their remaining moral worth: "Work is the only sure method of separating the deserving from the undeserving."⁵² This was the flipside of Bodelschwingh's benevolence: those who shirked the guidance of Wayfarers' Aid he regarded as depraved beyond rescue.

Although Wayfarers' Aid found much support among authorities and middle-class commentators, it also provoked skeptical questions. One question was whether it really enhanced feelings of dignity. The work its stations and colonies offered was mostly dreary and exhausting, like digging ditches and chopping wood. Socialists denounced the system as unacceptable for self-respecting workers from the start, but also some conservatives and liberals criticized such labor as hardly compatible with the honor of journeymen. Bodelschwingh retorted: "This opinion has to be condemned: as if honest work, however lowly, could ever dishonor a man and was not, in all cases, more honest than living on alms.... To give an able-bodied man work is always more merciful than to give him alms; the former elevates him, the latter dishonors him.... it must be considered an honor to be given the opportunity to earn one's bread at the labor stations."⁵³

Nevertheless, skeptics were right to doubt that all wayfarers shared Bodelschwingh's views on what was respectable or despicable. Artisans still made up a substantial part of those tramping the country in the late nineteenth century, and many of them routinely asked for small gifts of money or food along the way—a practice known as *fechten* (fencing). Guilds had largely eroded by this time, as had official tolerance toward journeymen customs, which indeed often merged with outright begging. Yet in popular culture, these customs retained some esteem, and from the perspective of journeymen, fencing freely certainly could be more consistent with personal dignity than chopping wood at labor stations.

Objections to the theory that work was always elevating sometimes aimed much further and targeted modern labor relations in general. Many conservatives were, in fact, as critical of industrial capitalism as socialists. The exploitive anonymity of large enterprises, as one author deplored, greatly contributed to the erosion of human feeling among the poorer classes:

The workers became humans who were exploited in large numbers without any consideration for their human worth (*Menschenwerth*). They became humans who earned their bread in the sweat of their faces, laboring like ants day and night deep under the earth or in the scorching heat of the iron mills; but only their physical force, not their moral worth, was considered. The needed human power was purchased only in order to enable the operation of huge machines or to systematically use it just like the power

⁴⁹ Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, *Vorschläge zur Vereinigung aller deutschen Arbeiter-Kolonien nach allgemeinen Grundsätzen* (Bielefeld: Bethel, 1883), 65.

⁵⁰ von Bodelschwingh, *Vorschläge zur Vereinigung aller deutschen Arbeiter-Kolonien nach allgemeinen Grundsätzen*, 4.

⁵¹ von Bodelschwingh, *Vorschläge zur Vereinigung aller deutschen Arbeiter-Kolonien nach allgemeinen Grundsätzen*, 17.

⁵² von Bodelschwingh, *Vorschläge zur Vereinigung aller deutschen Arbeiter-Kolonien nach allgemeinen Grundsätzen*, 5.

⁵³ von Bodelschwingh, *Vorschläge zur Vereinigung aller deutschen Arbeiter-Kolonien nach allgemeinen Grundsätzen*, 7, 41.

of a machine. No reward of appreciation crowned this work. . . . From here, only the cold, dull sentiment that characterizes the present-day industrial worker could result.⁵⁴

It was no wonder that many of these dehumanized workers lacked moral fortitude and rapidly succumbed to begging when unemployed, the author concluded.

Overall, however, the recognition that labor, too, can be degrading remained rather marginal in nonsocialist discourse on poverty, and even critics of capitalist exploitation mostly agreed that work under decent conditions buttressed men's dignity whereas idleness endangered personal integrity.⁵⁵ This put involuntary unemployment into focus, as well as the debasing effects of alms and poor relief. Authors of all political stripes agreed on one further major hazard: the system of criminal prosecution. Begging and vagabondage were punishable offenses, and in the wake of the economic depression, the numbers of convictions soared around 1880. Many commentators deplored the courts' routine sentencing of people caught begging or roaming to a few days in prison, and particularly the devastating impact of imprisonment on necessity-driven, at core still honest offenders: "A term in jail is always dishonoring . . . , its effects are degrading for the moral constitution."⁵⁶ Even worse was a term in the workhouse, which had a penal character in Germany. High rates of recidivism suggested that workhouse detention did more harm than good. For the same reason, majority opinion rejected suggestions to reintroduce flogging for beggars and vagabonds. The liberal economist Karl Braun, for example, replied to a statement in favor of flogging uttered by a member of the Prussian parliament: "I do not know whether Mr. von Schorlemer has read Schiller's fine story, *The Criminal from Lost Honor*. Then he would perhaps know what effects such drastic means can have, and how . . . the untimely application of flogging suffocates the last remnant of the sense of honor and drives people into the arms of vagrancy for good."⁵⁷

In sum, late nineteenth-century sociopolitical discourse depicted vagrants as highly endangered, yet mostly redeemable working-class men. Unemployment, inadequate assistance, initially reluctant begging out of necessity, subsequent arrests, and punishments all contributed to ruining the self-respect of originally intact individuals. Consequently, these people sank ever deeper, finally reaching a nearly subhuman stage. As countermeasure, it was essential to fortify the feeling of dignity among workers, by giving them the chance to earn their living, by establishing new systems of nondegrading social security, possibly even by acknowledging social rights. The sociopolitical debates of this period signal that many observers were well aware of the nexus between poverty and dignity. If people had to live in miserable conditions, it came as no surprise when they behaved miserably. The admirable old man who burned straw on his stove in order to veil his poverty could not serve as a yardstick for social policies, experts had learned since Wohlwill's times.

Nonetheless, such insights did not make miserable conduct tolerable. Most commentators across the political spectrum admitted that dire need sometimes forced people to beg. Some even acknowledged a theoretical right of the poor to ask for alms as a last resort; in juridical terms, this could be qualified as a form of legitimate self-defense.⁵⁸ Yet while begging sometimes appeared excusable, middle-class discourse still denounced it as intolerable because of its unique power to pull people down to a state beneath human dignity from where there was almost no return. Whether this axiomatic conviction matched social reality is another matter and beyond the scope of this article. It rather seems that begging often had much less dramatic implications and that large segments of the population continued to accept it as a

⁵⁴ Chevallerie, *Zur Bekämpfung der Bettelei und Vagabondage*, 9.

⁵⁵ On the German valuation of work in general, see Joan Campbell, *Joy in Work, German Work: The National Debate, 1800-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Of course, there were radical dissenters. For Friedrich Nietzsche's attacks on hypocritical talk about the dignity of labor, see Rosen, *Dignity*, 41-46.

⁵⁶ Chevallerie, *Zur Bekämpfung der Bettelei und Vagabondage*, 19-20.

⁵⁷ Braun, *Die Vagabunden-Frage*, 27.

⁵⁸ Robert von Hippel, *Die strafrechtliche Bekämpfung von Bettel, Landstreicherei und Arbeitsscheu* (Berlin: Liebmann, 1895), 13-15.

sporadic contribution to the working-class *economy of makeshifts*.⁵⁹ Journeymen on the road occasionally asked for individual donations, as did unemployed workers and paupers insufficiently assisted by their communities. We know little about their feelings, but there is no evidence that all these temporary beggars descended into the swamp of habitual mendicancy. Conviction statistics rather suggest that most of them went back to work after the economy had recovered. Concern among social experts did not abate, however.

Humans of Full and Lesser Value

Around the turn of the twentieth century, a new pattern of argument entered the discourse on poverty and mendicancy, introduced by medical scientists who took an interest in social problems. In Germany, the young prison doctor Karl Bonhoeffer opened a string of psychiatric studies specifically on beggars and vagabonds with a survey published in 1900. Bonhoeffer, who later became a renowned professor at the Berlin Charité, is remembered today primarily as the father of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and in this context his ethical attitude during the Nazi period has attracted some attention. His early work on vagrants, by contrast, though much quoted throughout the first half of the twentieth century, has remained largely ignored by historians.⁶⁰ For this study, Bonhoeffer analyzed the careers and medical conditions of 404 recidivist beggars arrested at Breslau jail. His aim was to use scientific methods to uncover the causal “laws” that underlay the constant recidivism of such men and thus to explain why all anti-vagrancy policies had so far failed.⁶¹

Bonhoeffer concluded that the vast majority of recidivist beggars were physically and, more important, mentally “defective,” usually from birth. They suffered from pathological “hereditary predispositions,” showed “signs of degeneration,” and were afflicted with “psychical abnormalities” such as imbecility, epilepsy, and alcoholism. In short, most of them were *minderwertiges Menschenmaterial*, that is, human material of inferior quality or, literally translated, of lesser value. The concept of *Minderwertigkeit* had not played any significant role in discourses on poverty until then. Psychiatry knew it since the early 1890s: it originally designated a purely medical classification that covered various mental conditions on the borderline between health and illness.⁶² In the context of rising eugenic thinking, however, it inevitably also pointed to the social worth of humans. The way in which Bonhoeffer used the term left no doubt about his social valuation. He referred to his objects of research as “antisocial elements,” as “habitual social parasites” who had “dropped out of the social body for good”; they represented “the last socially useless residue” that luckily showed a marked “tendency toward extinction” as the result of early death and rare reproduction.⁶³ Because mental defectives were not fully responsible for their actions, Bonhoeffer recommended abolishing the useless routine of punishment. Instead, they should be committed to nonpenal institutions and kept there indefinitely.

Similar advice came from Karl Wilmanns, another young psychiatrist who later became a tenured professor. In a thorough clinical study on a sample of hospitalized vagabonds who suffered from acute mental illness, Wilmanns interpreted his findings carefully and showed

⁵⁹ For the phrase *economy of makeshifts*, see Olwen H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France 1750–1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

⁶⁰ Even when mentioned, its problematic implications are largely missed; see Klaus-Jürgen Neumärker, *Karl Bonhoeffer. Leben und Werk eines deutschen Psychiaters und Neurologen in seiner Zeit* (Berlin: Springer, 1990), 46; Annette Greifenhagen, “Psychiatric Research on Homelessness and Mental Illness in National Socialist Germany,” in *Knowledge and Power: Perspectives in the History of Psychiatry*, ed. Eric J. Engstrom, Matthias M. Weber, and Paul Hoff (Berlin: VWB, 1999), 181–85. For more on the paradigm shift toward biomedical interpretations of poverty around 1900, see Althammer, *Vagabunden*, 516–44.

⁶¹ Karl Bonhoeffer, “Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis des großstädtischen Bettel- und Vagabondentums. Eine psychiatrische Untersuchung,” *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Strafrechtswissenschaft* 21 (1901): 1–65, quote 2.

⁶² Julius Ludwig August Koch, *Die psychopathischen Minderwertigkeiten* (Ravensburg: Maier, 1891).

⁶³ Bonhoeffer, “Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis des großstädtischen Bettel- und Vagabondentums,” 2, 42, 56.

empathy for their hard fate.⁶⁴ Yet additionally he published several articles in leading scientific journals in which he used the same harsh vocabulary as Bonhoeffer and arrived at even more extreme generalizations. Wilmanns too asserted that the bulk of vagabonds were *minderwertiges Menschenmaterial* with inborn parasitic and antisocial inclinations. He did not stress heredity as much, but he also judged the great majority to be unhealable, emphasizing pathological traits such as an abnormal weakness of will and an uncontrollable drive to wander. And he insisted even more resolutely than Bonhoeffer on their “elimination” from public life, arguing that this was a precondition for social progress in favor of workers of “full value” (*vollwertig*). “The more the state and public welfare does for the blameless worker who is physically and mentally of full value but unemployed because of age, illness, crises or bad business situations,” he declared, “the less avoidable it seems to withdraw welfare from the elements of inferior value . . . and to institutionalize them permanently or indefinitely.”⁶⁵

This reasoning indicates that the idea of human equality was evaporating under the gaze of a new generation of medical scientists. During the nineteenth century, discourses on poverty had overwhelmingly described the alms-seeking poor as originally normal persons endowed with reason, free will, and human feeling, no matter how far they sank in the course of their lives. The psychiatrists who began to stamp the debates on social issues around the turn of the twentieth century, by contrast, proposed that mendicancy was the symptom of an inborn biological defectiveness, which marked the affected as humans of lesser worth. In this perspective, beggars were not morally culpable, although neither Bonhoeffer nor Wilmanns consistently discarded the language of morals. They lacked the normal human capacity for autonomy, and hence could exist only as parasites. The term *Parasit* also indicated a radicalization. In the 1880s, many authors had metaphorically called beggars sponges or weeds (*Schmarotzerpflanze*, *Unkraut*), but never *parasites*, a more drastic term with a scientific tone reminiscent of modern laboratory medicine. From 1900 on, its use spread rapidly, together with the term *minderwertig*. These became keywords of a new, allegedly scientific understanding of deviant poverty adopted quickly by welfare experts who themselves were not medically trained.

An illustrative example can be found in the minutes of the *Deutscher Verein für Armenpflege und Wohltätigkeit*, the German umbrella association of poor relief boards and charities. At the 1908 meeting, which was dedicated to the problem of vagrancy, mental abnormality already appeared as an explanation beyond doubt. The keynote speaker Oskar Sell, a pastor, expounded “that the so-called vagabonds and fencing journeymen are largely psychopaths . . . , that we are confronted with ill men and persons who have taken to the road because of some psychic-moral defect.”⁶⁶ Emil Münsterberg likewise concurred with the diagnosis of widespread defectiveness, albeit in a somewhat more nuanced sense:

When I was younger, I imagined everything was healable by loving care. Like probably most directors of poor-relief boards, I have since given up this delusion. We have to take into account where these people come from. Some have limited intellectual and physical capacities from birth. These are the mentally and somatically inferior (*Minderwertige*), the imbeciles, these are the blind, the deaf-mute, etc. Others are the residuum of economic circumstances. I do not dare to decide what is, or is not, the fault of society. I only see the facts before me: a large number of people worn down by life and circumstances, who are incapable of giving themselves any aim and direction, who are a burden even to themselves, and who must be described as parasites and vermin

⁶⁴ Karl Wilmanns, *Zur Psychopathologie des Landstreichers* (Leipzig: Barth, 1906).

⁶⁵ Karl Wilmanns, “Das Landstreichertum, seine Abhilfe und Bekämpfung,” *Monatsschrift für Kriminalpsychologie und Strafrechtsreform* 1 (1904–05): 605–20, quote 605.

⁶⁶ “Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der 28. Jahresversammlung,” *Schriften des Deutschen Vereins für Armenpflege und Wohltätigkeit* 87 (1908): 80.

of human society. These people need protection, and society has a right to protection against them. . . . So I come to the conclusion, really dictated by humanity and not biased by sentimentality: we must be able to use coercion in dealing with these elements.⁶⁷

In such statements, frustration resonates. Despite the huge social reform efforts of the preceding decades, a substantial stratum of apparently wretched people persisted, defying all well-meaning attempts to pull them out of mendicancy. Even if they themselves might not feel ashamed, their persistence was the shame of a civilized nation: Münsterberg noted how it embarrassed him when foreign visitors made remarks about the many beggars and match-sellers on the streets of Berlin.⁶⁸ To those responsible for administering welfare, the medical explanation of deviant poverty offered exonerating arguments for why they could not succeed within the existing legal framework. Liberal nineteenth-century welfare and penal policies had rested on the assumption that humans were born free and equal in their basic capacity for self-responsibility—an assumption that now seemed obsolete.

What were the lessons to be drawn? For large parts of the expert community, the primary inference was to endorse reforms that would depenalize behavior such as begging and vagabondage. Some decidedly advocated for more inclusive social policy approaches. The workhouse director Hans von Jarotzky, for instance, fully shared the opinion that the inmates of his institution were mostly *minderwertig*; but in his view, their special weakness, which made them unable to compete “in the merciless fight for existence” and dependent “like children,” gave them a special right to support:

Every human has the right to exist und consequently also the right to be offered work that secures his existence. This is an indisputable demand of justice, and this the great Bismarck has acknowledged as well. . . . Society has the obligation to make an existence consistent with human dignity based on honest work possible for all its members. Here I must emphasize that society should feel obliged to provide work first and foremost for the countless partially disabled, in order to give these pitiable people the opportunity to use what remains of their capacities to scrape a modest but to some extent dignified existence.⁶⁹

Jarotzky had in mind voluntary labor institutions, as did the prominent welfare expert Christian Klumker, who envisioned rural worker colonies with conditions so acceptable that the vagrant poor would not object to staying there for good. In Klumker’s moderated version of the psychiatric explanatory model, the bulk of vagrants appeared as a type of especially uneconomic people “who cannot stand on their own feet in our competitive struggle, but who would be industrious under permanent proper direction, or could have played an excellent role as serfs or slaves.”⁷⁰ Therefore, he hoped, they would voluntarily subordinate themselves to a benevolent guidance.

Much more representative for late Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, however, became Münsterberg’s conclusion: that is, the call for new coercive measures, based on the argument that weak-willed drifters with no control over their inner drives would never voluntarily stay in institutional care for long. Not punishment, but long-term retention in suitably transformed workhouses or worker colonies was both necessary and legitimate, as for example, Johannes Horion asserted: “Respect for personal freedom is as inappropriate here as it is in the case of children and lunatics.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ “Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der 28. Jahresversammlung,” 75–76.

⁶⁸ “Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der 28. Jahresversammlung,” 75.

⁶⁹ Hans von Jarotzky, *Die Bedeutung der Arbeitsanstalt Brauweiler für die Rheinprovinz* (Cologne, 1912), 4, 8, 11–13.

⁷⁰ “Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der 31. Jahresversammlung,” *Schriften des Deutschen Vereins für Armenpflege und Wohltätigkeit* 96 (1912): 120.

⁷¹ Johannes Horion, “Die Wanderarbeitsstätten,” *Zeitschrift für das Armenwesen* 14 (1913): 117–31, quote 128.

The psychiatric differentiation between humans of full and lesser value initiated a highly problematic tendency in early twentieth-century social reform discourse. Poverty, as far as it did not fit under the absolving shield of insurance against acknowledged social risks, appeared not so much as the result of a bad education or adverse social conditions anymore, but as the result of psychophysical deficiencies. If not like parasites, then beggarly people were at least like serfs, slaves, lunatics, or never maturing children. They were not fully developed persons but rather a subaltern type of humans in need of lifelong tutelage or even confinement. While depicting them as dangerously numerous, social experts, of course, nevertheless saw them as a minority on the margin of society. With the rise of general living standards and the expansion of the preventive welfare state, broader strata of the working classes were becoming respectable. This advancement, however, only highlighted the abnormality of the dropouts who would or could not participate in social progress.

It is not that the moral category of *Würdigkeit* was simply replaced first by the socioeconomic category of objective neediness and then by the category of biological value.⁷² Notions of *Würde* in the sense of demonstrating one's sound human feeling and striving did not disappear. Rather, a new explanation surfaced for why some people failed in this quest. Social experts of the early twentieth century rarely used the noun *human dignity*; but when we recall how central reason, free will, and conscious self-control were (and still are) to the concept, then it becomes clear that exactly these core ingredients of human dignity were at stake. Mendicancy was the symptom of an impaired humanity that lacked the capacities for an autonomous life in accordance with human dignity. Therefore, society had to safeguard such lesser humans under industrious and clean conditions that at least simulated a dignified existence.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to illuminate the historical background of an issue that is eminently important in present-day constitutional and human rights discourse: the relationship between human dignity and the fight against poverty. It has searched for traces of this relationship in sources produced by nineteenth-century German middle-class authors who were engaged in social reform debates, with a focus on debates about mendicancy. These authors were not philosophers, and their intention was not to elaborate on the essence of human dignity. They belonged to a heterogeneous community of practically orientated men (and more rarely women) who saw themselves as social experts in a broad sense and whose collective discourse helped to set in motion modern welfare-state building. Although human dignity has become the explicit justification for social rights only since the Second World War, this article argues that implicit, everyday notions of the concept contributed to motivating social reform initiatives much earlier—with ambiguous implications that might still be relevant today.

Human dignity is a grand phrase. It enshrines a long European tradition of celebrating the worth of mankind, a worth that rests on the cognitive faculties with which God or nature has endowed our sapient species. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights continues this tradition when, after declaring that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” it goes on to state that they “are endowed with reason and conscience.” Reason and conscience constitute human dignity, and since the Enlightenment that has meant the recognition of a basic equality of all men (and, later, women) as autonomous subjects destined to live self-directed lives. The phrase *human dignity* also enshrines a tradition of indignation that became more virulent at the same moment. In Western modernity, it seems, human dignity is invoked particularly where it appears violated, in emphatic cries to respect and

⁷² Wilfried Rudloff, “Würdigkeit, Bedürftigkeit, Wertigkeit. Zum Wechselspiel von Armutsbildern, Armutspolitik und Armutssystemen in Deutschland 1880–1960,” in *Arm und Reich. Zur gesellschaftlichen und wirtschaftlichen Ungleichheit in der Geschichte*, ed. Günther Schulz (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2015), 249–65.

protect what makes humans human. Poverty provokes such indignation because it pushes humans into a somehow beastly sphere reigned over by necessities of survival.

But against what is indignation directed: poverty as a failure of society, or poverty as a failure of the poor to live up to what human dignity demands? Throughout the examples presented in this article, the two options intermingle, and perhaps inevitably so, precisely because poverty was (and is) generally understood as a condition in which human dignity cannot thrive. The concept, it seems, never totally steered free from its elitist background that associated dignity with conduct more common among the educated and well-off classes. Even in the eyes of authors critical of society, the poor therefore quickly appeared as brutish or animalistic, as captured in a state beneath human dignity.

Another dilemma enclosed in the modern, enlightened notion of human dignity is its linkage with autonomy. Dire need tends to subvert individual autonomy, but so does assistance through alms, charity, or public relief. Wohlwill, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, solved the dilemma by insinuating that to retain one's dignity even in the face of extreme poverty was simply a matter of moral determination. The Aachen district government in the 1840s also stressed the importance of moral determination, but acknowledged the responsibility of society to foster the inner strength of poor children, instead of ruining it through humiliating practices. In the late nineteenth century, social reforms focused on replacing alms with work, poor relief with self-earned insurance benefits, humble pleading with social entitlements. One motivation was the insight that individual determination was not enough to cope with distress and degrading experiences and that society must therefore provide structures that make it easier to keep one's head high. But what about those who, all the same, continued to vegetate in the swamp of misery? After the turn of the twentieth century, the conclusion drawn was that humans, even when limited to European men, were not born free and equal after all. Some lacked reason and conscience to an extent that ruled out an autonomous dignified existence.

In recent decades, ideological trends have again shifted. The shock over National Socialist atrocities worked as a great catalyst, but the German Basic Law's invocation of human dignity was not understood immediately as an obligation to respect the autonomy even of socially deviant persons.⁷³ Since the 1960s, however, tolerance toward nonmainstream lifestyles has rapidly increased; courts and legislators have cut back the coercive measures applicable against marginal groups; and the normative system of present-day Germany firmly insists on the equal worth and dignity of all humans. At the same time, the preventive welfare state has massively expanded, and although it has also become the object of many-voiced critiques, the acknowledgment of social rights has, in a broader historical perspective, attained an unprecedentedly high level.

Nevertheless, the relationship between poverty and dignity remains dilemmatic. Despite official tolerance, beggars on the streets still provoke highly ambivalent feelings in which indignation about failings of society and indignation about the attitude of these people often mingle. Perhaps more astonishing is the extent to which welfare dependency is still associated with degradation. Since 1961, social assistance, the heir to poor relief, is a claimable right in the Federal Republic of Germany, but, as Münsterberg predicted, this has not eradicated its stigma. Is this because it is too parsimonious, or because it is still means-tested and has to be "begged" for, or because it is linked to controls that infringe on personal self-determination? Would an unconditional basic income lift the degradation of the poor,⁷⁴ or would such a "gift" only deepen feelings of exclusion from satisfying exchange between equals? Ultimately, can the experience of human dignity become universal only if we

⁷³ On the continuities in welfare policies after the war, see, for instance, Matthias Willing, *Das Bewahrungsgesetz, 1918–1967* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

⁷⁴ On the controversies over this idea, see Tony Fitzpatrick, *Freedom and Security: An Introduction to the Basic Income Debate* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Philip Kovce and Birger P. Priddat, eds., *Bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen: Grundlagentexte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

have “affluence for all,” as for instance Ludwig Erhard alleged in the 1960s?⁷⁵ Or does such a proposition reduce the concept to absurdity by identifying it with the comforts of a globally destructive Western lifestyle?

Certainly, metaphysical speculations on human dignity as a primordial endowment that elevates our species above animals stand on rather shaky ground today. What still makes the concept powerful is its potential as a claim and normative goal: the goal to turn the world into a better place where “everyone” can live “in line with human dignity.”⁷⁶ What characterizes such a life, and what levels of material security or distributive justice it requires, will necessarily remain controversial. One of the greatest dangers to human dignity, it paradoxically seems, lies in proclaiming an objective knowledge about where it ends.

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⁷⁵ Ludwig Erhard, *Wohlstand für alle*, 8th ed. (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1964), 138, 223.

⁷⁶ As a state responsibility, this goal was for the first time constitutionally enshrined by the Weimar Republic; see “Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches,” August 11, 1919, Art. 151.

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