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### The Recursive Violence of Anthropological Exceptionalism

Toward the Ecological Transformation of Dignity

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#### Abstract

Prevalent theological concepts of human dignity purport to safeguard human lives equally, but in fact, because they ground human inviolability in assumptions of the violation and violability of animal lives, they expose and endanger those human beings whose differences – whether racialized, gendered, embodied, or in relation to colonial power – have been historically constructed through animality. As an alternative, this essay works out an account of dignity as the creaturely respiration of God's Spirit, manifest in cultivated solidarities of creaturely life and expressed especially through shame and gentleness.

Keywords: dignity, animals, Holy Spirit, theological anthropology, violence

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

“The cultural marginalization of animals is, of course, a more complex process than their physical marginalization. The animals of the mind cannot be so easily dispersed” (Berger: 15).

After controversy about the appropriate method and venue, a large crowd gathered at Coney Island on January 4th, 1903, for the execution of Topsy the elephant (Wood: 405-8; Shukin: 150f). Some decades earlier, she had been kidnapped from her birthplace in Southeast Asia, trafficked to the United States, and made to perform in a circus. Topsy’s resistance to performing and her responses to the violence of her trainers earned her a reputation as a difficult and dangerous elephant. When Frederick Thompson and Elmer Dundy, the new owners of Luna Park at Coney Island, thought that the expense of Topsy’s maintenance was no longer in balance with the revenue she generated, they arranged for her death, rescinding the offer to sell tickets to the event only under pressure from the ASPCA.

On the selected morning, Topsy refused to go to the site of her execution. Reporting on the event, the *Saint Louis Republic* interviewed “Whitey” Alt, a trainer who was accustomed to sleeping in the stall with Topsy. Having recently been laid off by the new owners himself, Alt refused twenty-five dollars to bring her to the place of her death. The paper’s reporter found him outside the gate of Luna Park, weeping (Anonymous). On account of her non-cooperation, the executioners decided to “bring death to her.” All four of her legs were chained to the ground and large wires were fastened to her front-right and left-rear shackles. She readily ate two carrots dosed with enough cyanide to kill her shortly before all the electric power in Coney Island was diverted, for a period of ten seconds, through Topsy’s body. Her execution was recorded by the Edison Film Company and the footage was shown around the country.<sup>2</sup> The short film shows Topsy standing loosely before she suddenly stiffens and smoke rises from the shackles on her legs. Slowly, she tips and falls onto her right side.

The 6,000 some-odd volts that killed Topsy was her last, fatal encounter with the powers of American society. Her life was caught up in various overlapping regimes of power, none of which demonstrated anything more than instrumental regard for her own well-being, desires, or social bonds. A succession of human hands reduced her subjectivity, her creaturely integrity, her short tenure as a breathing being, to an investment for capital, to an afternoon diversion, to a laborer whose strength erected the circus tent. Whatever meaning and value Topsy’s life had *to her* was largely irrelevant to the meaning and value that her life had for the humans that she regularly entertained and enriched. Even Topsy’s staunchest advocates, such as John Peter Haines and the ASPCA, only lobbied for a humane execution rather than a profit-generating

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful for the generous criticism of Paul Schutz, Elizabeth Johnson, the editors of *Journal of Religion & Society*, the Theological Anthropology section at the 2019 annual meeting of the CTSA, and the participants of the 2019 “Religion and Justice” Kripke Center symposium at Creighton University, all of whose comments have greatly improved the essay.

<sup>2</sup> There is a widespread, but mistaken, story that Topsy’s execution was orchestrated by Thomas Edison himself, in an attempt to portray direct current electricity as dangerous (and raise support for his preferred alternating current electricity). Edison did not attend the event, however, and the controversy over which form of electricity should be adopted had been resolved ten years before Topsy’s death.

public spectacle. Although Thompson and Dundy did not sell tickets, those who owned buildings in the neighborhood did, and a large crowd witnessed Topsy's death. Millions more saw Edison's film.

This is an essay about dignity and the permeable boundary between humanity and animality. I begin with this instance of cruelty and exploitation, because even if the particular details of this spectacle would not be allowed at present, commonplace assumptions about animal life and animal suffering in relation to profit, entertainment, nutrition, health, and power have not grown more compassionate in the intervening century. In our moment, the lives and deaths of animals involved in industrial agriculture or medical, military, and industrial experimentation are no less painful and no less constrained than Topsy's. They number in the tens of billions. How do such scenes interrupt and intervene in conversations about human dignity? Are these scenes the regrettable underside to the prerogatives of human dignity or do they somehow betray and falsify dignity? How are human lives caught up—as perpetrators, as bystanders, and as victims—in the structures of power that exploited and discarded Topsy and so many others?

The fundamental dignity of the human person is widely recognized as a bedrock principle of Catholic social teaching, Catholic ethics, and Catholic theology generally (McCrudden: 7). Appeals to human dignity support numerous ethical and political positions, sometimes on opposing sides of the same issue. Such interpretive divergence reveals that the full *meaning* and *implication* of human dignity is a matter of considerable debate, but also that the conviction itself is unquestionably foundational.

This essay critiques prevalent conceptions of human dignity, especially theologically articulated conceptions of dignity, not in order to undermine dignity itself but to show that the cumulative *effect* of appeals to dignity stand at cross purposes with their stated *intention*—the protection of vulnerable human beings. In addition, appeals to dignity functionally validate tremendous and unnecessary animal suffering. The concept of human dignity purports to safeguard human lives equally, but in fact, because it grounds human inviolability in the violability of animal lives, it exposes and endangers those human beings whose racialized, gendered, and embodied differences have been historically constructed through animality. Despite efforts to draw a hard line between humanity and animality, conceptual traffic across the permeable human-animal boundary is impossible to contain. In the constructive second half of the essay, I will eschew dignity as a strict function of anthropological exceptionalism and work out an account of dignity as the creaturely respiration of God's Spirit manifest in cultivated solidarities of creaturely life, solidarities that take shape through learning to inhabit shame and gentleness.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Anthropological exceptionalism is the claim that human beings are (a) categorically different from all other animals, that is, marked by a difference that transcends any other species-difference, and (b) for that reason, more valuable than all other creatures. This essay reiterates my critique of dignity in another recently published essay, but reworks the constructive account of dignity in the direction of “shame” and “gentleness” because of my lingering dissatisfaction with “vulnerability” in the earlier piece (Meyer 2017).

## Human Dignity and the Fulcrum of Anthropological Exceptionalism

In Christian theology, dignity is most frequently attributed to human beings as a function of the image of God. Like the image of God, dignity is a function of species membership that endows an inviolable status which demands and inculcates mutual respect.<sup>4</sup> Also like the image of God, theological accounts of dignity generally restrict the concept to human beings alone. While it is often said that nonhuman animals deserve respect for their own unique importance, it is exceedingly rare to find a theological text that attributes *dignity* to nonhuman animals. Similarly, many contemporary philosophical accounts of dignity that eschew theological foundations, nevertheless rely upon anthropological exceptionalism to attribute dignity to human beings alone (e.g., Kateb: 5, 17, 23). Of course, a great many people in our world treat animals, or at least *some* animals, with a kind of functional dignity, but it is surprisingly difficult to find explicit rationale, theological or otherwise, for attributing dignity to animals in this way.

In Catholic social teaching, human dignity is a universal function of human nature that cannot be aligned with the boundaries of any national, cultural, or religious community; it is an implication of the divine image and the vocation of dominion which cannot be eradicated by sin (e.g., *Gaudium et Spes* sec. 12, 29, in O'Brien and Shannon). The disabled, the elderly, the young, the poor, the immigrant, they all hold dignity essentially and ineradicably in their human species-being. Every human being shares a basic dignity simply by virtue of being human and not on the basis of any capacity or ability (Meilander: 1-8). While freedom, rationality, and orientation toward goodness are manifestations of human dignity, the dignity of any particular human being does not depend on any test or criterion (Hollenbach: 134-35).

Catholic thought relies heavily on the concept of dignity in questions of justice. Pope Francis invokes human dignity repeatedly in *Laudato Si'*, his 2015 encyclical addressing ecological degradation and economic inequality (23 times by my count). Dignity is at the root of Francis's arguments for access to clean water and adequate affordable housing, for the fundamental equality of rich and poor, against stark economic inequality, against cruelty to animals, and for the responsibility of stewardship in creation (Francis: sec. 30, 56, 69, 92, 94, 130, 152, 158, 193). In describing *integral ecology*, his signal contribution to the Catholic social teaching tradition, Francis knits nonhuman animals into the fundamental sociality of human life through the ideas of solidarity and subsidiarity, regarding relationships to animals and ecosystems as part of the moral and spiritual fabric of human life. Yet, in line with the prevalent dignity tradition, *Laudato Si'* repeatedly endorses anthropological exceptionalism and studiously avoids attributing dignity to nonhuman animals. Other animals have worth, value, particular goodness, particular perfection, intrinsic value, significance, and ultimate purpose outside humanity, but not dignity (Francis: sec. 69, 76, 83, 118). In fact, immediately after extending one of the cognate concepts listed above to nonhuman animals, Pope Francis regularly defends anthropological exceptionalism using the concept of dignity (e.g., Francis: sec. 90, 119). On the sole occasion in the encyclical where Pope Francis attributes dignity to a nonhuman entity, it is a recognition of the "intrinsic dignity of the world," but this invocation

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<sup>4</sup> McCrudden distinguishes four major conceptions of dignity: (1) attributive dignity, dignity as a relational dynamic; (2) dignity as elevated status; (3) dignity as an attribute or essence; (4) dignity as a function of group membership (McCrudden: 8-9). This essay's critique is largely directed at the latter three, while its constructive argument is likely an example of the first.

is a synecdochical extension of human dignity to “our common home” rather than an attribution of dignity to nonhuman creatures (Francis: sec. 115).

Pope Francis has admirably brought attention to ecological crises and their effects upon the poor. Francis’s concept of dignity, however, relies upon and reinforces anthropological exceptionalism – a point that emerges even more starkly given the concern of the text as a whole to *include* nonhuman creatures in patterns of human sociality. These unreconciled tensions in *Laudato Si’* represent an attempt to extend the logic and concepts of social thought beyond the boundaries of humanity while simultaneously maintaining continuity with the tradition of adamant anthropological exceptionalism that runs through Catholic social teaching and mainstream Christian theology.

One significant problem with an account of human dignity grounded in anthropological exceptionalism is that it indirectly validates, and even directly mandates, the violent degradation of nonhuman animals.<sup>5</sup> Even though assertions of human dignity often explicitly repudiate cruelty, violent degradation is built into any concept of dignity based on anthropological exceptionalism, for four reasons.

First, concepts of human dignity based in anthropological exceptionalism start from the assumption that humanity and animality are essentially opposed categories, which leads to a competitive, zero-sum, and oppositional concept of dignity (Wolfe: 6). That is, human beings hold dignity but nonhuman animals lack it, and attributing dignity to animals necessarily undermines the dignity of human beings.<sup>6</sup>

Second, these oppositional accounts of dignity are incapable of fostering relationships of ecological, moral, and spiritual reciprocity with nonhuman animals – the sort of relations evoked by *Laudato Si’* – and slide quickly into relations of prudential management. Where reciprocal, personal relationships between human and nonhuman creatures flourish, they overwhelmingly occur in spheres of privacy that do not threaten the social order. That is, wherever something like dignity *does* extend to nonhuman animals in practice, those relationships are still subordinated to a larger cultural framework of ownership, management, and exploitation. Many of us attribute dignity to particular animals in our intersubjective interactions, but in industrialized capitalist societies such relationships are always caught up in larger social structures in which animals are reductively bought, sold, and managed as resources.

Third, since inviolability is the difference that dignity makes, human dignity based in anthropological exceptionalism secures a measure of inviolability for human lives on the back

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<sup>5</sup> John Berkman incisively marks, with regard to questions of violence and degradation, the same kind of tension in the 1997 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that I have described above in *Laudato Si’* (Berkman).

<sup>6</sup> For example, in his systematic theology, Robert Jenson asserts that the moral integrity of the animal rights movement is on par with that of Nazism insofar as both blur the line between animality and humanity – Nazis by stripping people of their humanity, animal rights activists by attributing moral values to nonhuman animals. Jenson’s dismissive link between these two manifestly different political aspirations seems, to put it mildly, intellectually unsustainable. To see the attribution of dignity or rights to nonhuman animals as a threat of this magnitude clearly relies on an oppositional, competitive, and zero-sum understanding of dignity (Jenson: 56-58; see also Smith).

of an assumption about the violability of animal lives. Such an assumption inevitably normalizes and naturalizes violent objectification of nonhuman animals.

Fourth, the assumption of animal violability, often under the banner of dominion, validates (as in industrial meat production) and even mandates (as in medical and pharmaceutical research) routinized violent degradation of animals. The infinite value of human life authorizes the sacrifice of animal lives, whether for human health and well-being, or more trivially, for cheap hamburgers. In mainstream American society, animals just are the sort of creatures who we confine for the entire span of their lives, deprive of basic social, psychological, and corporeal needs, and subject to pain for the sake of economic efficiency, regulatory certification, knowledge production regimes, and dietary preferences.

Allow me two representative examples of the routinized horrors that nonhuman animals face on a regular basis. The average American consumes twenty-nine land animals per year. Nearly 10 billion animals (not counting fish) are slaughtered for American consumption annually (USDA 2018a, 2018b). Less than five percent of these animals live outside of the factory-farmed, industrialized agriculture model. The grim deprivation of day-to-day life and the routinized cruelty of slaughter for animals within this model has been well documented, despite ongoing industry efforts to restrict and criminalize observation of their facilities.<sup>7</sup> Pressure for “efficiency” creates high-speed slaughter facilities in which it is not uncommon for still conscious and struggling animals to be boiled, skinned, and have limbs sawn off (Safran Foer). A second example: Run an internet search for “LD50” and the name of a household cleaner, automotive product, swimming pool chemical, or medication and you will find the quantity of the product in question that kills half of the animal population upon whom it is forced by ingestion or injection – that is, the lethal dose for 50% of the test population. It takes a significant number of trials to pinpoint the LD50 number for each substance. For a more benign substance, a shampoo for example, the test requires injecting or force-feeding tremendous amounts of a substance into a creature who is more affected by its volume than its toxicity. In every case, animals who are suffering significantly on the way to death cannot be “put out of their misery” because doing so would skew the results of the trial. In many cases, the knowledge produced seems disproportionate to the suffering caused.

These are uncomfortable examples. Yet, if anything, the prevalent concept of human dignity has supported and perpetuated this routinized violence rather than gaining traction against it. One of the psychological mechanisms that enables ongoing widespread complicity with these horrors is the reassuring thought that, being animals, the creatures subjected to such suffering are less important than human beings, and that while regrettable, such violence serves the interests of dignified human beings. Aaron Gross argues persuasively that in the last analysis, this pervasive cruelty and domination is not actually about consumption, but about ritually securing status for human beings (Gross: 182; see also Anderson: 302; Stanescu 2013: 142). That is, our society’s exploitation of animals serves the praxis of a humanity ritually

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<sup>7</sup> The so-called “Ag-gag” laws are anti-whistleblower laws that have been passed by many state legislatures (AL, AR, IA, KS, MO, MI, NC, ND) under heavy pressure from industry lobbying. These laws generally criminalize covert filming in agricultural facilities. They have been challenged, with occasional success, on the grounds of violating first amendment freedoms of speech.

differentiated from animality through patterns of violence. “We” are who we are, we *know* who we are, we *remind* ourselves who we are, by doing this to “them.”

In Sylvia Wynter’s profound and precise way of putting it, “Humanness is no longer a noun. Being human is a praxis” (Wynter and McKittrick: 23). Giorgio Agamben theorizes the discursive aspect of the praxis of humanity with what he calls the “anthropological machine.” For Agamben, human beings are caught up in the mystery of their own lives, a mystery which we prematurely resolve by abjecting some part of ourselves as “animal” in order to elevate and idealize another aspect of ourselves as the norm of true humanity. This internal boundary between abjected animality and idealized humanity comes to overdetermine creaturely difference generally so that, in the West, we human beings separate ourselves from nonhuman animals, denying our commonality with them in a way that enables us to lump them all together in a single category (“animal”) and generate regulatory fictions that bind us to a normative ideal of humanity (Agamben: 12, 15-16, 26). Those regulatory fictions emerge into practice in two directions at once: as narrowly defined disciplinary norms of true humanity (against which difference may be measured as divergence) and as routinized sacrificial violence against animals that reinscribes the tenuous border between humanity and animality.

The boundary between humanity and animality always runs *within* human beings as well as between them and other animals. The folding back of that boundary makes the assumed violability of animality dangerous. If human dignity generates and sustains the toleration of cruel exploitation of nonhuman animals, that is a blight on justice sufficient to raise important questions about the value of the concept. Yet, even worse, the violability of animality comes back to bite human beings who society renders precarious through its prejudicial mechanisms.<sup>8</sup> We turn now to the cycles of recursive violence that the praxes of human dignity generate among humans.

### Abjected Animality and Recursive Violence

“It would seem that the White race alone received the divine command to subdue and replenish the earth! For it is the only race that has obeyed it, the only one that hunts out new and distant lands, and even a New World to subdue and replenish.”

Thomas Hart Benton, “Speech to Congress 1846” (quoted in Douglas: 101).

While Agamben’s anthropological machine helpfully specifies some mechanisms within Wynter’s notion of humanity as a praxis, Agamben does not attend sufficiently to the way that race, gender, and colonial politics shape the “humanity” produced through those praxes. Wynter provides a necessary corrective in demonstrating that “humanity” always conceals a particular “genre of the human,” a local set of values rather than a static and essential nature common to all human beings (1995: 34-36; 2003: 280-82; Wynter and McKittrick: 31). As Alex Weheliye notes in his incisive critique of Agamben, it is not enough to note that some human beings are reduced to “bare life” without attending to the particular gendered and racialized ways that historical and cultural powers discipline human beings into humans, not-quite-

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida writes: “The violence inflicted on animals will not fail to have profound reverberations (conscious and unconscious) on the image humans have of themselves” (Derrida and Roudinesco: 63).

humans, and nonhumans (3, 71, 113). All too often, humanity is a praxis that leverages the privilege of some human beings off of the violability of other human beings vis-à-vis conceptual relays with animality. In other words, leveraging human dignity off of the assumed violability of animals through the logic of anthropological exceptionalism is an operation that repeats, in more or less subtle terms, across intra-human differences. In conversation with Sylvia Wynter's work, this section draws attention to cycles of recursive violence generated by human dignity's abjection of animality, an abjection that subjugates racialized, gendered, and colonially subordinated counterparts to a falsely universalized conception of human life.

In a fine-grained historical and conceptual genealogy, Sylvia Wynter's work brilliantly uncovers the way that "humanity" purports to be a universal abstraction coterminous with the species *homo sapiens*, but in fact corresponds to what she calls "Man" (1995: 36; 2003: 260, 299). "Humanity" is never invoked without evoking the content of a specific social imaginary. Within a world of economic, political, and cultural systems dominated by Euro-American influence, "humanity" skews toward whiteness, hegemonic masculinity, colonial power, and heteronormativity. In other words, one particular "genre" of human being ("Man") is vastly over-represented within the concept of "humanity" despite the diversity of human subjects (Wynter and McKittrick: 23; Thomas: 21; Jackson: 670). The effect of this over-representation (and its corresponding under-representations) is the promulgation of *anthropological gradients* in which some human beings enjoy more immediate access to the benefits of humanity while other human beings struggle to assert, attain, and maintain their full humanity. For many people, humanity is something to be earned or proven over and over again rather than something that can be assumed. The anthropological gradients generated by the overrepresentation of "Man" have radical, devastating, and pervasive consequences for the people rendered precarious by the structures of power they uphold.

But the subjugation of animality beneath humanity is not simply a *model* for the construction and maintenance of racialized, gendered, and colonial domination. Subordinated animality becomes a conceptual relay for constructing and enforcing the subordination of other human beings through a range of specific stereotypical associations. A substantial literature traces the particular animal associations that maintain domination across various registers of human difference, from gender to coloniality.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, human cultures have sustained very few long-term patterns of social domination *without* attributing animality to the dominated in some way. It is important, however, to offer specific examples.

Anthropological gradients cannot be disentangled from white supremacism. Anti-black racism originates (together with the modern concept of race itself) as an alignment of geographical and color difference with species difference (Wynter 1995: 34, 36; 2003: 299-304, 322-23; see also Jennings: 37, 58-63). Over time, crack-pot theories that biologize race as separable evolutionary lineages have used chimpanzees and gorillas to build associations between Africa, blackness, unpredictability, threat, and limited intelligence. Culturally pervasive anti-Black thinking, then, links animality to stereotypical markers of blackness (e.g., expressiveness) in ways that validate repressive violence, de facto segregation, naturalized

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<sup>9</sup> On gender: Adams; on sexuality: Chen; on race Roberts; on disability: Taylor; on coloniality: Fanon; on religious difference: Gross: chap. 6.

poverty, and restrictive social control (Ko and Ko: 20-27; Roberts: 18, 81, 165). Recent encounters in which white people have called the police because Black Americans were barbecuing in a park, talking in a restaurant, or acting out in class are only the tip of an iceberg of injustice generated by a racialized anthropological gradients, for which some ways of being human are more human than others.

Anthropological gradients cannot be disentangled from patriarchy. The ineradicability of sexual violence and the inability of those most thoroughly steeped in toxic masculinity to dissociate sex from violence derive, at least in part, from culturally pervasive links between femininity and animality – particularly prey species. Many heterosexual men (mis)understand the process of finding and initiating intimacy with a partner almost exclusively through the metaphors of hunting or predation, which explicitly casts a romantic relationship as an encounter in which one creature overpowers, objectifies, and consumes another (Adams: 73, 82, 219). Stereotypical associations of femininity with bodily beauty and emotional volatility are further links to animality and further avenues for objectification, since animals are reductively understood as irrational, instinct-driven bodies (Plumwood 1993: 22, 120-23). Where masculinity claims rationality and self-control, men naturalize and justify the ongoing subordination and control of women in society.

In short, anthropological exceptionalism produces a mobile concept of dominated animality that craven and powerful people attach to fellow human beings in the service of subjugation and exploitation. In highly specific, yet fluid ways, traits associated with animality are attached to particular “kinds” of people in ways that justify domination.

In principle, every human being holds an equal claim on human dignity. In practice, the concept of human dignity builds upon an assumption of animal violability that generates and justifies cycles of recursive violence that cause capricious harm to people rendered precarious by mainstream biases. As Aaron Gross writes, “Deploying the human/animal binary, which inevitably shores up other binaries like modern/primitive, threatens the best of what the human/animal binary was (in a sympathetic reading . . . at least) in part intended to achieve: the grand idea of the inviolability of *homo sapiens*” (81; see also Wolfe: 21). Because the domination of animals also structures anthropological gradients around human differences, “some consider themselves more human than others” and, in point of fact, are better able to secure the benefits of humanity than their neighbors (Francis: sec. 90). Society maldistributes human dignity, along with so many other social goods (wealth, education, opportunity, security, clean water, nourishing food, housing, medical care), along the lines of historically established inequities and injustices. The seeming inevitability and intractability of grinding poverty and violence in some parts of the world correlates to naturalized violability of some human lives under association with animality (Butler: 31). In practice, human dignity safeguards those who are already secure in the name of inviolable humanity while exposing the precarious to cycles of recursive violence rooted in the violability of animality.

Let me be clear, I am not arguing that people in our society are incapable of treating nonhuman animals as if they were bearers of dignity; nor am I arguing that social injustices and inequities are totally intractable apart from reconfiguring human relationships with nonhuman animals. Rather, I am arguing that the constitutive exclusion of animality from the vast majority of our accounts of dignity (especially, though not exclusively, our *theological*

accounts of dignity) connects in important ways to the persistence of pernicious social inequities of gender, race, colonial status, and other lines of human difference susceptible to anthropological gradients. Louder and louder assertions of human dignity necessarily fail to address discrimination, degradation, and exploitation, because they fail to see the ways in which, building on anthropological exceptionalism, the concept of dignity itself undermines the full humanity of many people through cycles of recursive violence. Such voluminous assertions uncritically regard the problem as *quantitative* (a deficiency of dignity) rather than *qualitative* (a malformed concept of dignity). More of the same will not work. In order to function adequately to support the well-being of all human beings, the notion of human dignity should be reconfigured such that it no longer relies on anthropological exceptionalism. Dignity must be reasserted with a qualitatively different understanding of the concept, a dignity that actually repudiates the cycles of recursive violence that resonate in the oppositional space between humanity and animality. Given the centrality of dignity to Catholic thought, reinterpreting human dignity seems like a more fruitful path than abandoning the concept altogether. Accordingly, I turn now to a constructive account of creaturely dignity that attends to humanity and animality without recourse to anthropological exceptionalism.

### Toward a Pneumatological Account of Dignity

Dignity, in theological perspective, is a constitutive connection to God that imbues creatures with a living integrity that demands moral regard. Prevalent accounts of human dignity begin from the image of God and dominion over creation (Hollenbach: 134; Hanvey: 220). Insofar as Jesus the Christ is the image of God par excellence, human dignity has been explicated Christologically. The tendency toward anthropological exceptionalism in the *imago dei* and dominion tradition is fairly obvious, but Christology also tends toward anthropological exceptionalism insofar as God becomes incarnate as a human being. The exceptionalism of the *imago dei* is often reinforced when that image is understood as the *imago Christi*. I have argued elsewhere for an understanding of the incarnation that repudiates rather than endorses humanity's pretensions to exceptional status, but such an argument represents, at most, a minority tradition (Meyer 2014). The first step in the constructive work of this essay, then, is to shift from an account of dignity centered in Christology toward an account centered in pneumatology, a shift with ample biblical and theological warrant.

In, through, and on behalf of living creatures, the Spirit renews the face of the earth. In Genesis 2, God shapes a human from dust and blows the Spirit of life into muddy nostrils, making the human being a *nephesh* – a living creature. Other *nepheshot* are created in similar fashion and, enigmatically, the text sets up an expectation for an intimate fellowship of creatures where partnership and cooperation draw humans and other animals together. God creates all the animals in response to the human's loneliness and brings them forward "to see what he would call them." The text tucks the creation of animals into the origin narrative of sexual difference, demonstrating an expectation of creaturely commonality that is subsequently frustrated on the way to human disobedience. These others were supposed to have been partners, company, perhaps even kin.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> My reading of Genesis 2-4 here (for a longer version, see Meyer 2018: chap. 5) is similar to Newsom: 60-72.

Psalm 104 speaks of all creatures together and demonstrates that the connection between breath and Spirit cannot be confined to humanity alone: “When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.” We breathe in, we breathe out, we bear the Spirit of God in our living breath and share a common air with all other living creatures.

A similar connection emerges in Romans 8. Paul writes of all creation groaning in the Spirit, awaiting redemption. In a graphically earthy image of resurrection, the dirt of creation groans in labor pains, longing to push those who have died out of their graves and into a life beyond death. Participating in the same longing, those who are attuned to the Spirit groan with the groans of their own constitutive dust, longing for “adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” Where the consequence of human disobedience in the garden was alienation from the soil, the Spirit has been continuously at work to reconcile human beings to the earth for the sake of the creation as a whole. The gift of the Spirit, in this perspective, does not lift humanity out of created relationships into a heavenly realm (a false transcendence), but inspires virtues that pertain to the common life of creatures before God. To meet a living creature is to meet someone sustained by the Spirit of God through his or her own particular corporeal capacity for breath. As in the body of the church, the Spirit delights in (comm)unities that emerge through the diversity of gifts and forms of life.

These scriptural warrants show that the vivifying, sustaining, evolving work of the Spirit in creaturely life is a constitutive connection to God capable of imbuing creatures with an integrity that demands moral regard – that is, dignity. Here, dignity is not a divine interruption of evolution, an injection of moral meaning that pertains to humanity alone. It is the name of the Spirit’s work in and through the evolving lives of the world, peculiar to each creaturely form. Dignity is not a metaphysical kernel replicated without difference in iterations of an inscrutable essence or nature. Dignity is a mode of interaction, a constitutive vivifying connection, a function of the breath/Spirit that is always moving from the inside to the outside and the outside to the inside.

Reading in this tradition, we can open the anthropocentrically restricted claims of theologians about the Spirit’s work into a more expansive account of creaturely dignity. For example, Karl Rahner writes, “The body is nothing other than the self-consummation of the Spirit in space and time” (1981: 88) such that “the spirituality of the creature always remains spirituality in materiality right up to its absolute perfection” (1969: 177). And again, Rahner speaks of the Spirit’s influence as an “unlimiting of the limited” that personalizes creatures as subjects who directly encounter the infinitude of divinity at the horizon of their experience (1969: 169-70; see also Pannenberg: 524). If we see that it is the Spirit who renews the face of the earth through the breath of creatures, as in Psalm 104, then there is no defensible reason to follow Rahner in restricting these claims to humanity.<sup>11</sup> Neither Elizabeth Johnson nor Mark Wallace are directly concerned with dignity as such, but both offer sophisticated

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<sup>11</sup> Rahner bases his restriction on the assumption that only human beings are self-aware subjects who grasp their own finitude, in part in their subjectivization through language. A half-century of ethological research undermines any confidence that self-awareness or language can be used to draw a coherent boundary between human beings and other animals. The ethological research of Jane Goodall, Marc Bekoff, Joyce Poole, and Franz de Waal (among many others) challenge the restriction of morality, language, self-awareness, etc., to human beings.

accounts of the Spirit's work in evolution, drawing creaturely life forward into new formations through a constitutive intimacy with animality (Johnson: 158-73; Wallace: 14).

Clearly, there are rich resources available for a tradition that locates dignity in a common-but-differentiated creaturely connection to the Spirit of God. Significant swaths of scripture and tradition vitiate any categorical distinction between humanity and animality. While theologians working in an ecological vein (and increasingly, the mainstream Christian tradition itself) reject destructive notions of human dominion in favor of stewardship or kinship/solidarity models for humanity's place in creation, the prevalent concept of human dignity is a tether that binds Christians to dominion through assumptions of anthropological exceptionalism. At present, dignity is a dominion concept when what is desperately needed is a kinship/solidarity concept, both for the sake of living gently on the earth, but also for the sake of living gently with one another. If pneumatology can provide the theological root for an account of common-and-differentiated creaturely dignity beyond the constraints of anthropological exceptionalism, the next step is a non-competitive, non-exclusive articulation of creaturely dignity within creaturely relations (both inter-human and inter-species). For this purpose, I would like, perhaps counterintuitively, to turn to the concepts of *shame* and *gentleness*.

### Dignity and Shame

Shame, admittedly, carries considerable conceptual and emotional baggage and may seem an odd choice with which to develop an account of creaturely dignity. In some regards, shame may even seem to be the *opposite* of dignity. Shame gains negative associations because it attends the experiences of violation and victimization. It also attends regret over misdeeds of the past, even those for which reparation has been made. Because shame attends a loss or lack of control, it can be used to manipulate and disempower. To do so is to abuse shame and has nothing to do with the positive relation to shame that I want to recover here. Shame is not a pleasant affect to experience in any case, but its most helpful aspects emerge when we think of it as a response to *finitude* (especially particularity and dependence) rather than as a response to violation or moral *failure*. In taking stock of our involvement in the cruelty that pervades human-animal relations, a certain kind of moral shame seems appropriate and responsible, but this is not (or not primarily) the sense of shame that I want to lift up. Breaking the connection between shame and guilt disrupts a mechanism that problematically marks finitude as a failure. Linking shame/finitude with guilt negates the goodness of creation and generates compensatory acts of violent shamelessness.

As the essay has already shown, associating dignity and animality remains counterintuitive, especially within a theological framework. Somewhat paradoxically, associating dignity and shame may *help* to make that connection more palatable. My wager here is that since there are some intrinsic connections between shame and animality, rehabilitating the more familiar experience of shame as a mode of dignity may provide a bridge to rehabilitate animality as a source and center of dignity as well. I would like to link shame and dignity, not in order to make shame a positive emotion, something to be celebrated or enjoyed, but to help us bear our shame differently and respond differently in the relations where shame arises. Gratefully drawing on the work of other scholars, I want to describe shame as an orientation to our basic interdependence on other living creatures, an invocation of shame as a way of life, more than an affective response to moral judgment.

The core experience of shame is the awareness of being seen and identified in ways that are (partly) beyond one's control. Shame is the onrush of a realization that there is a relationship to be negotiated where we had not previously seen one. Linked in this way to subject formation in the context of community, shame retains a connection to the moral dimension of life but can be distinguished from guilt and failure. If we learn to bear our shame gracefully, we are empowered to learn new ways of inhabiting our particularity in community with others. Borne well, shame is a door into profound reciprocities of respect and solidarity.

Restoration ecologist William Jordan III explains shame as a function of our embeddedness within ecosystems and food chains – our relationships of fundamental dependence upon those creatures whom we habitually regard as beneath us. Repressing shame encourages violent exploitation instead of modes of dependence marked by temperance and gratitude (38, 41). For Jordan, shame names the ongoing process of a subject's reconciliation with the existential-ecological limits of being inseparable from a particular social, ecological, temporal, and spatial location. Likewise, historian Virginia Burrus theorizes shame as the discomfiting affective and cognitive awareness of limitation and finitude in the context of relationships (Burrus: 4). For Burrus, shame is the power and the danger of relationality; it even stands as the condition for the possibility of love, marking the smallness of our autonomy and the porousness of our boundaries. Theologically, shame is the creature's readiness and anticipation for divine grace, the calling out of a nature for its perfection.<sup>12</sup> Linn Tonstad helpfully draws the Spirit into these connections, "When the Spirit is present other bodies and things need not move out of the way to make room for the Spirit; instead, the Spirit's presence serves to intensify those things just in their own characters" (244). Shame is an honest and sober relationship to the particularity of my own character as the Spirit intensifies that particularity. Shame arises when we are seen in ways that are partly beyond our control and just as such, it is the hinge point from which interaction begins and transformed interactions can begin anew (Burrus: 151). Even in comfortably settled relationships that have been built over the course of years, shame emerges in moments of change. When I am found doing something differently, I wonder to myself, "Who am I being seen as now? Can I be *this, here, now* with you?"

Shame is capable of specifying and articulating dignity as a mode of creaturely relation. Dignity need not be an elevated status that leverages inviolability for some off of the assumed violability of others. Rather, dignity might be regarded as a sober solidarity based in acknowledgment of common but differentiated limitation and finitude. Creaturely dignity belongs to creaturely finitude: a life exposed to the world and vulnerable, but carrying the breath of God. In an ecological perspective, dignity arises from reciprocal recognition of fragility, finitude, and belonging to the land. Carried well, shame enables an ascetic attunement to the particular dynamics of an ecological community. When I can sit with my own shame, empathy moves quickly to see neighbors as bearing a dignity that demands my respect. When I repress or sublimate my shame, I am prone to compensatory acts of degrading violence,

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Edward Schillebeeckx's reflections differentiating finitude from fault. Shame is not one of Schillebeeckx's categories here, but shame helpfully occupies a middle ground naming a humble and sober acceptance of limitations between an abstract affirmation of the goodness of creation (which erases the suffering and pain that limitation presses upon every particular creature) and a conflation of finitude with guilt (113-15).

covering my finitude by exploiting the vulnerability of others. The idea of dignity as inviolability is a delusional denial of shame, an impossible negation of the finitude that no one actually escapes.

The deeper memory of the Christian tradition holds open space for paradoxical notions of dignity-in-shame. Amidst the honor/shame culture of ancient Rome, early Christians suffering through persecution inverted prevalent social values in order to identify divine grace and social honor with what Romans regarded as humiliation and social shame. Without valorizing humiliation, we can imagine dignity and shame functioning in similar ways – as an exposure that fosters solidarity through a transformation of social values.

Dignity articulated through shame is the ground for inter-species relationships marked by moral and spiritual sensitivity (in other words, an integral ecology). The particular shame and glory of being human is membership in kingdom *animalia*. One element of the bewitching experience of meeting the eyes of an animal – reciprocal seeing and being seen – is surely the uncanny awareness of being recognized as similar or familiar (Bailly: 62). Our entire moral and political landscape shifts in acknowledging commonality across the particularity of creaturely difference, accepting the shame of being seen as an animal by an animal (Stanescu 2012: 576; Massumi: 3). Intimacy with my human-animal shame shows other creatures to be particular, dignified bearers of the Spirit of God, finite and vulnerable in their own ways.

To act shamelessly, to betray the dignity of the living, is to objectify and exploit others as if they were only resources to be utilized, as if they were not centers of awareness of the goodness of finitude and particularity. There are relationships of predation and consumption, I would posit, that do not betray dignity because they preserve a sense of shame.<sup>13</sup> There are also relationships of consumption that fundamentally degrade and betray dignity – industrial meat-production, for example – because they erode the possibility of relationships of mutuality and shame. The deepest theological objection to factory farming is not that it is a morally shameful form of cruelty (as true as that is), but that it is a shameless corruption of creaturely interdependence that turns God-beloved and God-loving creatures into interchangeable objects whose sole significance is measured in input-costs and consumer satisfaction.

### Dignity and Gentleness

If reconciliation with a kind of shame enables a different way of bearing my own particular dignity in relationships with others, then *gentleness* names a different way of approaching the peculiar dignity of the creatures that I encounter. Here I would like to draw especially on the thought of the late philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle about the *power* of gentleness. Dufourmantelle analyzes gentleness as a quality of interaction that emerges in speech and touch as the very foundation of genuine intimacy. She is most interested, though, in what remains most subtle about gentleness – that it bears a kind of *power*. Gentleness is the power of formation and transformation, of learning and attention. The quiet, persistent power of

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<sup>13</sup> I recognize that my argument here, and in the essay as a whole, runs the risk of falling afoul of Lisa Sideris's excellent critique of the use of concepts like "community" and "interdependence" in ecological theology. I can only say that I am not naive about the kind of violence involved in predation and consumption and that, nevertheless, I am working to think about these relationships in an explicitly moral and theological way.

gentleness can be shouted down, but it cannot be eradicated without destroying the possibility of intimacy and meaning. Dufourmantelle writes:

Gentleness is a formidable ethic . . . The threat of death itself is not enough to ward it off. Gentleness is political. It does not bend; it grants no prolonging, no excuse. It is a verb: we perform acts of gentleness. It aligns with the present and concerns all the possibilities of the human. From animality it takes instinct; from childhood, enigma; from prayer, calming; from nature, unpredictability, from light, light (47).

Gentleness is a condition of possibility for non-exploitative cross-species relationships driven by bonds deeper than fear or reward. A previous version of this argument attempted to locate dignity in shared vulnerability (Meyer 2017: 564-69), but I have come to think (following Cynthia Willett) that vulnerability is too closely linked with fearful passivity, and does not yet name the agencies, empathies, and reciprocities necessary to live together differently on the earth (Willett: 37-38).<sup>14</sup> Gentleness is one way of naming that empathetic agency.

Further, gentleness is capable of generating the ecological modes of subsidiarity and solidarity that *Laudato Si'* sketches under the banner of an integral ecology.<sup>15</sup> If our relationships to nonhuman creatures are more than engagements with a stockpile of homogeneously quantified “resources,” then to resist the pervasive distortions of late capitalism we need new ways to think about the shape of responses and responsibilities within ecological communities. There can be no template, but gentleness is a condition of possibility for this work. Ecological solidarities and subsidiarities must be worked out and passed down in particular places and among members of particular species (Plumwood 2002: 176-77). Large-scale political and economic systems cannot build communities of creaturely dignity, they can only facilitate their local cultivation or else disastrously crush and exploit them. Confederations of creatureliness (ecosystems) must manage their own interactions wherever possible – which will require that human beings come to conscientiously inhabit our ecosystems (against transnational consumptive abstraction). The power of gentleness arranges for generative alliances of multi-species solidarity but necessarily, each such alliance is negotiated in intensely local and flexible ways.

Articulating our shared creaturely dignity through shame and gentleness requires us to think differently about difference (Ramírez-Barreto: 97; Derrida and Roudinesco: 66). Gentleness fosters a transformed “ecology of selves” (Kohn: 16) because it approaches difference presuming the possibility of solidarity. Gentleness responds to difference not as a problem to be solved, but as a solidarity yet to be negotiated. In contrast, the prevalent concept of dignity extends solidarity only the basis of the recognition of sameness, or on the supposition of a hidden sameness. Dignity’s dubious inviolability is granted only when difference may be set aside as epiphenomenal in the name of an equally dubious universalism. Thus, on the prevalent model, difference is dominated conceptually or else it becomes the pretext for material antagonisms that lead to domination. Accounts of dignity grounded

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<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to Anthony Paul Smith for a similar critique of my earlier argument.

<sup>15</sup> Though I suggest that Francis’s reticence to acknowledge nonhuman dignity undermines his integral ecology from both the human and the animal side.

Christologically in the *imago dei* tend to enforce conformity. Specifications of the *imago dei* as rationality, moral discernment, freedom, or love – perfectly embodied, in any case, in Jesus the Christ – become norms that mark and regulate conformity and divergence. Because the *imago dei* is linked to dominion, it is commonplace to subject those who diverge from normative conceptions of rationality, morality, freedom, or love to domination and discipline under the sign of stewardship over the earth as a whole.

In contrast, we can escape such pressure toward creaturely conformity through an account of dignity that transpires among diversely embodied breathers who inhale and exhale with the Spirit. Creaturely differences, both intra-human and inter-species differences, are expressions of God's creative fecundity rather than failures to asymptotically align with a monocultural metaphysical dignity. In this rearticulation of dignified difference, leveraging domination off of the competitive and exclusionary construction of difference is demonic and idolatrous – a grievous betrayal of the Spirit. Gentleness builds solidarity across the multiple registers of human difference and, no less, across registers of creaturely difference. These solidarities, of course, will be as different as the creatures who inhabit them. A solidarity that honors the dignity of a fellow human being will not and should not look the same as a solidarity that honors the dignity of an elk, fox, or wolf. Audre Lorde expresses the connection I am trying to draw between gentleness, dignity, and difference: “when we define ourselves, when I define myself, the place in which I am like you and the place in which I am not like you, I'm not excluding you from the joining, I am broadening the joining” (Lorde: 11). Rather than papering over differences and their historical connections to oppression with a pallid universalism (as in an emphasis on species-belonging), gentleness approaches difference as a broadening frontier of connection, cultivating equanimity and building previously unimagined modes of solidarity that respond to particular histories of exploitation and oppression.

### Conclusion

The oppression and disempowerment of people along the lines of racist, sexist, colonial, and homophobic patterns of perception cannot be separated from ecological degradation and exploitation. This is not only because the poor and disempowered are those who live closest to the land and are the first to feel the local effects of deterioration, though that is a crucial point. The oppression of human beings and the degradation of the earth's living communities are linked through the logic of dominion, appropriation, and inviolability that establish and maintain anthropological gradients through the subordination and degradation of animality – often in the name of human dignity itself.

The power that kidnapped, exploited, and finally killed Topsy the Elephant is a vulgar, alienated, and ultimately demonic power. That shameless power is analogous to the shameless power behind the industrial capture of veal calves and their mothers, battery-caged laying hens and genetically modified “broilers,” painfully confined sows, generations of mice bred to develop cancers, or rabbits used to calculate the toxicity of household cleaners.

The prevalent discourse of human dignity significantly contributes to the oppression of both humans and animals, even while claiming to be an antidote to the former. The prevalent concept of human dignity, especially in its Christian theological formulation, unintentionally subjects already-precarious human beings to ideologically validated violence by construing

animality as naturally violable in cultural contexts where human beings are rendered precarious precisely through associations with animality.

In working out a constructive response that struggles against this reality, I want to insist (emphatically) that I am making no claims to priority. Ongoing struggles for liberation and justice for precarious and marginalized human beings should not be set aside, de-prioritized, or delayed for the sake of recognizing the dignity of nonhuman animals. Alienated and globally exported Euro-American cultures have prevailed at (re)producing regimes of power that build plantations, concentration camps, factory towns, ghettos, and reservations (under the aegis of development, enlightenment, and progress) explicitly designed for people whose particular differences are discursively affiliated with animality in ways that justify and naturalize institutional violence.<sup>16</sup> Nor, when we think of gendered oppression, have the most intimate domestic spheres been free of the domineering logic of anthropological gradients and degradations of human animality. It is clear to me that dignity, conceived under the aegis of anthropological exceptionalism, is a tool that injures the people whom it purports to protect, while also subjecting nonhuman animals to routinized, mandated, and naturalized violence. Anthropological exceptionalism binds these oppressions together such that re-thinking the dignity of human beings along with the particular dignity of all living creatures is part of the transformative work of liberation and justice in God's creation. The urgency of these struggles cannot be entirely dissociated.

Louder and louder assertions of dignity will not address these problems because the naturalized oppression of racialized, colonized, gendered, sexualized, and disabled persons through associations with animality is not a function of a *deficiency*, or *lack* of dignity – it is a central feature of conceiving human dignity along the lines of anthropological exceptionalism in the first place. What is needed is not *more* dignity, but a transformed concept of dignity that approaches difference differently, not as a boundary where dignity begins and ends, but as a frontier where solidarity must be negotiated in, through, and across creaturely histories, physiologies, socialities, and cultures. Dignity is a quality that inheres in relations, it must be cultivated, learned, and guarded, but it can only emerge in local negotiations and alliances. Dignity, in this sense, can be inhibited by unjust political and economic policies (or encouraged by just ones), but it can never be *created* except through local organization and generational formation.

This essay has argued that a pneumatologically focused account of dignity – the spiration of God respired in creaturely breath – is capable of contributing positively to this struggle for human social justice in the context of the integrity of creation. Further, linking the concept of dignity to particular notions of shame and gentleness gives shape to the kinds of creaturely

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<sup>16</sup> As I write, asylum-seeking families are separated from one another and housed in privately run, taxpayer supported, for-profit concentration camps along the southern U.S. border, an action of the United States ideologically justified by appeals to the dignity of American citizenship. Scratching the surface of this ideology reveals that citizenship is a fragile cipher for whiteness, whose inviolability is being actively constructed through the bureaucratic administration of degrading cruelties, naturalized across lines of human difference inflated through association with animality (in this case, through the connotations of “migration,” “desperation,” “caravan,” “threat”). American fascism easily appropriates the prevalent concept of human dignity as tacit support of its mechanisms of oppression.

relations in which dignity inheres. To do that work, I suggest, would be to cooperate with the Spirit in our own contexts, finding previously unimaginable forms of solidarity in creaturely dignity by sharing a deeper breath.

There can be a healthy shame recovered by pausing to look into the eyes of those who look back. There is power in the gentleness of proximity, familiarity, and dependence as negotiated modes of solidarity built across the frontiers of difference. The power of the Spirit in creation and the outlines of the Realm of God are manifest in the interactions where such shame and such gentleness prevail. It is in these relations – and not in an exclusive inviolability that ultimately enforces conformity – that true dignity inheres. Learning how to live together with all of our differences as dignified human beings in God’s justice will require cultivating ways of life that repudiate and overthrow the dehumanizing powers of our prevalent political economy. Ultimately, it will also require cultivating sensitivity to the expansive pluriformity of dignity that appears no less in animality than in humanity – *differently* a billion times over, but no less.

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