DIGNITY AND EQUALITY – TERMINOLOGICAL DISTINCTIONS FROM THE LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Equality is a fundamental principle of modern democracy. Initially theorized by the philosophers of the Age of Enlightment as an answer to the increasingly acute disfunctionalities of a social system founded on the premises of the 'natural' inequality between people, the equality system reaches a primely and enthusiast legal consacration in the grand Declaration of human rights at the end of the XVIIIth Century, being swiftly assimilated by the liberal Constitutions of the XIXth Century afterwards and further, taken over by the great majority of the national, regional, international law systems. At the time being, equality stopped being a mere philosophical concept, but a rightful rule. Legally speaking, the principle of equality is apprehended as the forbiddance of discrimination - to be exact, the abusive treatments based on the premise of the inequality between people.
We can't state the same thing about 'dignity' - young legal concept, included in the realm of law only after the WW2, through the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights.Since then, the law uses the term on a grand scale, but it does not define it.
The article aims to rigurously clarify the relation between these two legal and interconected concepts: dignity and non-discriminantion. The analysis starts with the necessity of clarifying the content of the controversial notion of dignity and reaches the conclusion that, in spite of frequently inaccurate legal terminology, dignity is a fundamental value only partially covered by the egality priciple and the imperative rule of non-discrimination.

Keywords: dignity, dicrimination, egality, human rights, discriminatory treatments, abuse of right.

Equality is one of the founding principles of modern democracies, theorized, in the first stage, by the Enlightment philosophers in the effervescent context of the XVIIth and the XVIIIth century and juridically established by the first Declarations of law from the end of the XVIIIth century. Equality reflects a major change of paradigm in a social system (*Ancien Régime*) founded on a totally antagonistic principle: the one concerning the natural inequality of people. In its juridical meaning, equality looks not to abate the real differences between individuals (wealth, power, abilities etc.), but to establish a neutral normative and social position before these inevitable incongruences.

The concept of *equality* got a quick legal establishment in the Declarations of the XVIIIth century, being then imediately assimilated by the liberal Constitutions of the XIXth century. Legally speaking, equality assumes interdiction of arbitrary or illegal treatments – put in other words, the forbidance of discrimination. In its first states, equality sets forth, more than anything, the abate of aristocratic privileges, based on the birth criterion. Subsequently though, starting with the social evolutions, the pallet of criteria susceptible to generate discriminating treatments broadened considerably: sex, ethnic origin, religious beliefs, political views and, later on, physical disabilities or sexual orientation are, nowadays, as many normative flags for discrimination, basically omnipresent in the democratic legislations, whether national or international.

Taking the protection of human rights on an international scale (arisen after the Second World War), the notions of *equality* and *discrimination* have been enriched and given

other keys. Multiple normative contexts[1] as well as different approaches of the international courts, have broadened the fields where these two intertwined terms are applied and have refined their meanings. Judicial practice has proved that, besides the obvious, *direct*, asserted discrimination – for instance, administering unemployment allowances or other social advantages only to married men, but not also to married women[2], or establishing a different way of calculating the pensions according to ethnic origin[3]– yet another type of discrimination exists, an *indirect* one, through which a seemingly neutral measure, applied without any distinctions, generates outcomes which are, in fact, discriminatory (for instance, administering funeral aids in case of death of a close relative, in favour of all employees in a state, regardless of their origin or nationality, but on condition that the funeral takes place in the respective state, whether apparently regarded as a nondiscriminatory measure, actually puts the foreign employees with close relatives living in their native country[4], in most case, on a clear disadvantage).Indirect discrimination should not, in its turn, be confused with *disguised* discrimination, which stands for a form of direct discrimination, but dissimulated under the umbrella of excessive requirements (for instance: the demand to flawlessly speak the language of the Host State, given the conditions that the specific competences of the respective position do not demand such abilities). All these distinctions brought up the concept of *formal equality*, opposed to the *substantial equality* one, both being meant to identify the discriminatory character of a norm, not just according to the way a legal document is being put toghether, but also based on the outcomes in the reality realm[5].

Substantial equality sometimes assumes, however, also adopting some proactive measures - the so-called *positive actions*, or measures of *positive discrimination* - from the state, meant to reduce unjust social disparities - for instance, norms which would impose the anonymity of the CVs, so that the use of rejecting the candidates through ethnic criteria and not according to qualifications, merits and skills, would be discouraged; or determining a minimum mandatory percentage of positions for women in certain proffesional fields in which they are under-represented[6]. Also aiming to obtain substantial equality is the concept of *reasonable accommodation*, which implies adjusting the physical environment or the conjunctural reality with a set of measures that would ameliorate the circumstances of some underprivileged groups which, even in the case of unexisting discriminatory norms, can be disadvantaged through their own vulnerability (e.g.: building an access ramp for people with disabilities or having the meatless menu as an option for employees who, by reasons concerning religious beliefs, are fasting). The concept of *reasonable accommodation* draws attention to the fact that, under the circumstances of existing underprivileged groups (through

[1] E.g.: *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Convenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*

[2]*Broecks c. Olandei*, CCPR/C/D/172/1984 sau *Zwaan de Vries c. Olandei*, CCPR/C/29/D/182/1984;

[3]*Ibrahima Gueye ș.a. c. Franței,* CCPR/C/35/D/196/1985 – namely, the French law calculated differently the retired pays of French origin militaries, in relation to the Senegalesian ones, to the disadvantage of the latter;

[4]CJCE, C-237/94, *O'Flynn c. Adjudication Officer*.

[5]In UK, the Equality Act 2010 makes it clear that treating two people identically may not be sufficient to guarantee that they have been treated equally in law if the task, physical environment or service does not offer them equality of outcome.

[6]*Guido Jacobs v. Belgium,* CCPR/C/81/D/943/2000. Namely, the plaintiff pleaded discrimination on the terms of rejecting his nomination from one of the 22 positions within a public institution, out of which minimum 8, according to the Belgian legislation, should have been filled by women. His complaint was rejected, the Committee assessing the respective legal measure as being a positive action, adequate to the legitimate purpose of improving the poor number of women represented in the respective field.

their poor number in regard to the majority, or through their physical feebleness or by any other reasons), the simple inaction can stand for discrimination. All these measures meant to reduce the gap between underprivileged groups and the majority must have a proportionate character though, fit for the designated purpose, if not, the risk of a 'perverted' effect might occur, through which the initial underprivileged group is provided with an excessive artificial support, meant to block the else meritorious assertion of the majority group. It is the question of the so-called *reverse discrimination*, by dint of, for instance, a measure designed to encourage the training of an ethnic minority group through establishing a compulsory number of positions assigned to the respective group within the bounds of an university determines the rejection on this ground of far more well-prepared individuals, whose affiliation to the majority group thus becomes a disability[7] in the true meaning of the word.

Discrimination (the defiance of the principle of equality) can come to the fore in all the areas of social life, it can take on the most diverse forms, and its grounds are not limited to the many lists of criteria indicated by different legal texts, these lists being accounted as open, exemplifying. As for the ways through which discrimination and its authors can operate, there are four which can be identified: a) through a legal discriminating text (direct or indirect); b) through the discriminating appliance of the law, by the abilitated individuals and institutions; c) through discriminating acts of natural or legal persons; d) through the lack of measures meant to counteract discrimination or its effects (the lack of positive action). Thus, the main international protection of human rigts[8] texts reveal a set of four obligations of the State in its task of protecting the principle of equality, namely: a) guaranteeing the equal protection through law ('equality in law'). Judicial practice has repeatedly underlined that not any legal text which differentiates, is by default discriminatory, being that some social categories or groups are simply not suited to the situation stipulated for the respective norm[9], as also: not any ruling out of a category from a certain legal advantage is always arbitrary and abusive (for instance, ruling out individuals which do not hold Host State citizenship from the possibility of employment in certain public position which imply dealing with information of national interest) ; b) guaranteeing equality in the face of the law (the undiscriminating appliance of law); c) the forbidance of horizontal discrimination (practiced between private persons); d) guaranteeing efficient protection against discrimination.

The concept of *dignity* as we know it today - a universal attribute under which any human being is valuable in itself - was also shaped by the Enlightenment philosophers. Unlike *equality*, however, its legal acknowledgement came much later, namely just after World War II, with the Univesal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. It is true that UDHR was the debut of a spectacular legal and juridical career for *dignity* which, similarly to *equality*, later enjoyed a massive normative recognition within the immense majority of human rights instruments[10], being also inserted in more than one hundred constitutional texts and,

[7]see also Charles Taylor – *The Politics of Recognition*, p. 40, available at: http://elplandehiram.org/documentos/JoustingNYC/Politics_of_Recognition.pdf;

[8]*International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights* (Art. 26), *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (Art. 5), *International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* a.o;

[9]See, for example, *R. v. Hess*, [1990] 2 S.C.R. 906, and *Weatherall v.Canada*, [1993] 2 S.C.R. 872, in both of which it was held that a distinction on the basis of sex was not discriminatory – the former involving a Criminal Code provision specifying that only men can be guilty of the offence of statutory rape, and the latter deciding that a prohibition on male prison guards performing frisk searches of female prisoners while female prison guards were not restricted from performing such searches on male prisoners is not discriminatory;

[10]*Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Convenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Convention of the*

moreover, intensely instrumented by national and international courts[11]. It is also true that, just as *equality* is concerned, *dignity* is not a mere right, but a recognized fundamental value of all human rights, standing together with *freedom* and *equality* in the the preambles of international normative texts. The net difference to *equality*, aside from its tardive legal recognition, consists in that there in no articulate judicial theory, if not a definition of *dignity*, at either doctrinary, legal or jurisprudential levels, that would clarify its scope and significance. If where discrimination is concerned there is a real terminology specific to the field and an almost full consensus regarding types of discrimination, ways of counteraction, evaluation criteria of the legitimacy of assumed discriminatory measures etc. – in short, there is an elaborate theory on *equality*, and therefore, on discrimination – we cannot say the same about *dignity* which, although intensely invoked, does not benefit from an uniform interpretation. Moreover, on a doctrinary level, the notion is often subject to almost passionate impugnment[12].

The space and purpose of the present work do not allow a detailed presentation of the methods of deciphering these uncertainties regarding the legal concept of *dignity*. The approach itself requires reporting to the extensive analysis of the subject which have been made in this field[13]. I will simply synthetize here some relevant conclusions regarding the legal significance of the concept of *dignity*.

Namely because there is no legal definition or a legal development of the concept, any approach for clarification inevitably begins at the following landmarks: the historical context that led to its assimilation by right, the significance attributed to it in the collective mind at that moment[14], the legal texts in which *dignity* has been inserted and, last but not least, the way courts of law understand to instrumentalize the concept. A rigurous analysis of these elements leads to the following conclusions:

1. The legal concept of *dignity* proposed the legal protection of the *respect* owed to the human being and its placing, after 1948, alongside *equality* and *freedom* on the list of fundamental values underlying human rights has as a consequence an increase in the risk of abusive use of the rights, meaning that from this moment onward the human rights do not merely stand for our necessity to express ourselves freely limited only by the similar rights of our fellow human beings, but for the respect that we owe them. *Dignity* is not merely a right but also an obligation;
2. The *respect* for the human being, as a value protected by *dignity*, concerns essentially three elements: a) respect for *uniqueness*; b) respect for *autonomy* which in turn has several stances: freedom of choice for the decisions regarding one's own person, control over one's own existence and own person (including over one's social image) and guarantee of necessary conditions for self- development and personal fulfillment,

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Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Universal Declaration on Human Genom and Human Rights etc.;

[11]*Infra*, p. 7-8;

[12]Ruth Macklin - *Dignity is a useless concept,* British Medical Journal, 2003; Anne-Marie Le Pouhriet - „*Touche pas a mon Preambule!", Le Figaro,* 24 mai 2008; Gilbert Hottois - *Dignité humaine et bioéthique.Une approche philosophique critique",* Revista Colombiana de Bioética, vol. IV, no. 2, dec. 2009 and many others...

[13] Christopher McCrudden - *Human Dignity and Judicial Interpretation of Human Rights,* The European Journal of International Law, vol. 19, no. 4, 2008; Erin Daly - *Dignity Rights*, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013; Doron Shultziner - *Human Dignity: Functions and Meanings*, Don Chalmers & Ryuichi Ida, *On the International Legal Aspects of Human Dignity: Idea and Application,* (vol. *Perspectives on Human Dignity. A conversation,* Springer, 2007)*;* Jack Donelly – *Human Dignity and Human Rights,* University of Denver, 2009 available at: http://www.udhr60.ch/report/donnelly-HumanDignity_0609.pdf etc.;

[14]Is the one given by Kant in "*The Metaphysics of Morals"*

and c) ban on the instrumentalization of the human being (translation of the kantian principle: "treat the human being as a purpose in itself and not as a mean to an end");

3. As for behaviours that can possibly damage or express dignity, these can take many and highly diverse forms. In a majority of cases, the courts invoke dignity where infringement of certain rights that are already established is concerned or in case of an abusive exercise of freedom of speech (*ban of torture, inhuman or degrading treatments* – respectively inadequate detention[15], body search that requires taking one's clothes off[16], to the extent that it is not strictly necessary in relation to the actual data of the situation, shaving off of one's hair[17], etc.; *ban of slavery and forced labor*[18]; *the right to respect for private and family life*, e.g. the European Court of Justice (ECtHR) associates dignity with a transsexual's right to have their new identity recognized by authorities following a surgical intervention done to this purpose[19], or with the decision of a person affected by a degrading and incurable disease to make use of the ,,assisted suicide" procedure[20]; *the freedom of speech* – e.g. violating the dignity of immigrants by disseminating a report containing racist and mocking remarks at their address[21]; *ban of discrimination*[22]).This is explicable when taking into account that dignity is a fundamental value of human rights, which means that the rights are the expression of dignity and therefore any violation of a right automatically leads to the violation of dignity. Nevertheless there are situations where, although no human right has been violated, the courts find that dignity has been infringed upon – and these are the situations that highlight as a litmus the extra value brought by the dignity to the right: e.g., in a reference case[23],the Court of Luxembourg confirmed the decision of a German court of law to ban the marketing of a game that simulates killing by shooting[24],citing as reason for the decision the violation of dignity (as can be noticed, this is about the ban on instrumentalization of the human being). Or, in a similar case, The Supreme Court of Israel banned the showing of a pornographic movie under the pretext of respecting women's dignity[25].In another case on the *dignity*[26] matter, The Supreme Court of France confirmed the decisions of the local authorities to ban the *"lancer de nain"* shows, which consist in projecting a dwarfism affected person (specially equiped for this purpose) as far off into the public. Invoking

[15]*Peers v. Greece*, c.28524/1995, para. 75;
[16]*Valasinas v. Lituania*, c. 44558/98 (para. 117), *Van der Ven v. Olanda*, c. 50901/99, para. 60;
[17]*Yankov v. Bulgaria*, c. 39084/1997, para. 110-114:*<112. A particular characteristic of the treatment complained of, the forced shaving off of a prisoner's hair, is that it consists in a forced change of the person's appearance by the removal of his hair. The person undergoing that treatment is very likely to experience a feeling of inferiority as his physical appearance is changed against his will.113. Furthermore, for at least a certain period of time a prisoner whose hair has been shaved off carries a mark of the treatment he has undergone. The mark is immediately visible to others, including prison staff, co-detainees and visitors or the public, if the prisoner is released or brought into a public place soon thereafter. The person concerned is very likely to feel hurt in his dignity by the fact that he carries a visible physical mark.>*;
[18]*Siliadin v France*, c. 73316/01, para. 142;
[19]*Goodwin v. UK*, c. 28957/1995, para. 90;
[20]*Pretty v. UK*, c. 2346/2002, para. 65;
[21]*Jersild v. Denmark*, c. 15890/1989;
[22]*Goodwin v. UK*, c. 28957/1995, *Chapmann v. UK*, c. 27238/1995;
[23]Case C–36/02, *Omega Spielhallen und Automatenaufstellungs- GmbH v. Oberbürgermeisterin der Bundesstadt Bonn* [2004] ECR I–9609, para 34;
[24]The game also entered the Romanian market under the name *Lasermax* and is practised in specially designed spaces.
[25]*Station Film Co. v. Public Council for Film Censorship* (1994) 50 PD (5) 661.
[26]*W ackenheim v. France* , CCPR/C/75/D/854/1999: France, 26 July 2002, at para. 7.4.

public order reasons, the French judges considered the concerned individual's consent as irrelevant in this context. Exactly as in the case of *Omega* or *K.A., dignity* is invoked here autonomously, no other rights being violated, and, in addition, is the decisive legal argument in the matter[27].

As one can see, between *dignity* and *equality* there are differences as well as overlaps. A first observation that emerges is that whilst *equality*, as a fundamental value of human rights mentioned in the preambles of international acts that regulate and protect these rights is consolidated by an express ban on discrimination which is also regulated separately, within the contents of the same normative documents, *dignity*, in turn, does not receive a similar correlative obligation. There is no express ban on the violation of dignity or a clearly stated obligation to respect it. The consequence: the possibility of courts of law to reject requests based on violation of dignity even under the circumstances where violation is accepted[28].

As for the scope of protection, it is obvious that both concepts are based on the idea of respect towards the human being and also both particularly highlight the necessity to respect the *uniqueness* of the human being, even where this uniqueness is a disadvantage, a vulnerability. Uniqueness (determined by uncontrollable individual characteristics but also by the opinions of an individual – religious beliefs, sexual orientation, etc.) represents only one of the dimensions of dignity whilst it is the essence of *equality*[29]. Due to the fact that equality – in its legal sense – does not actually intent to blot out the differences, and neither are levelling and uniformity its main goal.On the contrary, equality is the one that actually encourages the uniqueness, protecting it from abuse and inequities, insofar as it represents a vulnerability. Dignity, by contrast, covers a broader range of human values that are adjacent to respect and uniqueness is only one of them. Therefore, it is clear that not every violation of the dignity means that we have to deal with some form of discrimination. For example, in the case of "lancer de nain", the injured party is dignity, even if there was not any other discrimination[30] Mr. Wackenheim's dwarfism was not the source of any discrimination in this case - Mr. Wackenheim, conversely took advantage from the show that the local authorities considered offensive for human dignity and, thus, he attacked the decision of those authorities[31]. The uniqueness of Mr. Wackenheim was purely circumstantial: the show was banned not because the alleged victim was a midget, but because the human body was mocked and used as a "flying object".

Therefore, when dignity is touched we are not automatically facing discrimination. Concerning the reverse question – whenever equality is breached (namely, we are facing a discrimination), the dignity is violated, too? – the answer could be affirmative, taking into

[27]Mentionable that, in the first stage, the local administrative courts of law abated the decisions of banning the shows.

[28]*Pretty v. UK*, c. 2346/2002, para. 65. It is interesting to notice how the Court, after acknowledging „ *the respect of human dignity and human freedom*" as „*the very essence of the Convention*" and also admitting the legitimacy of the complainant's claims based on the necessity of the protection of her own identity and on the distinction between "the right to life" and "the quality of life", finally rejects her request aimed against the authorities that denied her the possibility of assisted suicide. It is not the first such case where the Court, although recognizing the violation of dignity, rejects nevertheless the complainant's application (see also *Ranien v. Finland*, c. 152/1996/771/972, para. 53 or *Chapmann v. UK*, c. 27238/1995, para. 99);

[29]There are authors who noticed a certain paradox of joining side by side the values of dignity and equality: one highlights the value of differences, while the latter wants to cancel them (Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*);

[30] Note above 26;

[31]The irony in this case is that both sides have invoked dignity in supporting of the perfect opposites positions: Mr. Wackenheim considered that the ban of the show to be an offence to his dignity, limiting the possibility to earn money;.

account that there is an overlapping area between dignity and equality: the uniqueness, the identity. The elements related to identity are the main criteria underlying the discrimination basis (sex, beliefs, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disabilities etc.). Certain courts[32] have emphasized that these criteria do not always bring along an infliction upon dignity, but they do so solely in those circumstances where the particular criteria reside in specific mental prejudices or stereotypes related to a presumable inferiority of the discriminated victim (person or group).[33] However, there are cases in which legal distictions stem not from a presumption of inferiority (be it even undeclared) of the respective group, but, simply, from an inadequacy in regard to the benefits which were given to other category. These kind of situations are, for instance, those based on age (for example, administering social benefits to people who have suffered a trauma, but only on condition that they are aged over of 45, people under this age being declined the benefit, although their circumstances are the same. In these cases, even if discrimination is proven, the dignity is not touched. In order that dignity suffers inflictions along with the act of discrimination, it is necessary that: a) a discrimination *criterion* is used which reflects a prejudice regarding the inferior value of the discriminated group or person, or b) an *effect* of discrimination is produced which would affect one of the values protected by dignity (for instance, autonomy – in the previously mentioned case, for example, dignity can be inflicted if, regardless of the fact that, even if the accouned for criterion is neutral - the age under 45 - the effect is that the particular persons are kept in a state of poverty because their social benefit is denied), or c) both the above-mentioned conditions are met – in which case the infliction of dignity is stronger.

From a personal point of view, the fact that discrimination brings along an infliction upon dignity is less relevant as, once discrimination is noted, the judicial effects are the same for the discriminatory act/measure. The dignity's infliction could indeed have consequences in the form of possible material compensations but it does not produce, in itself, no additional effect towards the discriminatory measure.

The relevance of dignity in the field of discrimination must not be overestimated. The uniqueness, as the main value jeopardized by discrimination and protected by dignity, it is also protected by equality, but in a far better way. It is also true that the violation of dignity is in almost every case a secondary effect of the discrimination, but cannot be the only one: in one way or another, every individual/group excluded from some benefits of the law may invoke an attack upon dignity. That is why the assesment process of the discriminatory effect of an act/measure has to take into considerations other criteria too, as the compatibility in regard to the benefits which are applied for. Otherwise, the risk of reverse discrimination or abusive and speculative claims may become real. The dignity has a valuable role in the law, which is not the one of a substitute for missing rights.

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[32]Supreme Court of Canada, *Gosselin v. Québec (Attorney General),* [2002] S.C.C. 84; it is one of courts that is intensively preoccupied with the connection that could be established between discrimination and the violation of dignity. To be checked in this regard the study of Denise G. Réaume, *Dignity and Discrimination* in Louisiana Law Review, vol. 63/2003;

[33]*Miron v. Trudel* [1995] 2 S.C.R. 418, *Egan v. A.G. Canada*, [1995] 2 S.C.R. 513.

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This paper has been financially supported within the project entitled ***"Horizon 2020 - Doctoral and Postdoctoral Studies: Promoting the National Interest through Excellence, Competitiveness and Responsibility in the Field of Romanian Fundamental and Applied Scientific Research",*** contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140106. This project is co-financed by European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013. **Investing in people!**