

Conceptualising Dignity for Nature

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Abstract:

The Anthropocene poses a challenge to theorists of justice. Its imminent existential crises encourage reconsideration of the scope of our moral community. Switzerland, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Aotearoa New Zealand have passed legislation granting nature dignity or rights and privileges previously considered human-only, drawing nonhuman into the sphere of justice. While justice, rights and personhood traditionally depend on dignity for their normative foundation exactly what dignity is is less clear. Most modern conceptualisations grant dignity to humans alone. At least two theorists working within the capabilities approach have extended dignity beyond humanity. This paper argues an expanded conceptualisation of dignity is necessary to ground rights and personhood for nature. Drawing from Aotearoa New Zealand Māori ontology and epistemology it develops a conceptualisation of dignity that provides a normative grounding for the existing legislation. Conceptualized as an immersive functioning dignity, it is capable of underpinning legal rights, personhood and justice for nature.

Firstly, I establish a working conceptualization of human dignity, explore the legislative moves in the four nations, and discuss how these motivate the need for re-conceptualization. Secondly, the paper examines proto-holistic conceptualizations of dignity drawn from Nussbaum and Fulfer. Then, Māori ontology is used to explore an immersive functioning dignity. Finally, it looks at the implications for environmental justice in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: anthropocene, dignity, justice, Māori, rights of nature.

BIOGRAPHY

Christine is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. Her research explores the intersectionality of intergenerational justice, environmental justice and indigenous justice. Her research examines the limitations liberal theory places on imaginings of justice for future generations, the environment and post-colonial communities of some indigenous peoples. It explores the conceptualisations of intergenerational environmental justice of some Australian Aboriginal, Aotearoa New Zealand Māori and Ecuadorian and Bolivian Amerindian peoples. Exploring ways extant indigenous intergenerational environmental justice have been integrated into constitution, law, statute and practice it analyses their effectiveness and potential for wider adoption.