

## **HR 235: Dignity and Human Rights**

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We live at a time when the claim to human rights is both taken for granted and regularly disregarded. One reason for the disconnect between the reality and the ideal of human rights is that human rights have never been given a secure philosophical foundation. Indeed, many have argued that absent a religiously grounded faith in human dignity, there is no legal ground for human rights. Might it be that human rights are simply well-meaning aspirations without legal or philosophical foundation? And what is dignity anyway? Ought we to abandon talk about dignity and admit that human rights are groundless? Against this view, human rights advocates, international lawyers, and constitutional judges continue to speak of dignity as the core value of the international legal system. Indeed, lawyers in Germany and South Africa are developing a "dignity jurisprudence" that might guarantee human rights on the foundation of human dignity. Is it possible, therefore, to develop a secular and legally meaningful idea of dignity that can offer a ground for human rights? This class explores both the modern challenge to dignity and human rights as well as attempts to resuscitate a new and more coherent secular ideal of dignity as a legally valid guarantee of human rights. In addition to texts including Hannah Arendt's book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, we read legal cases, and documents from international law.

*Class size: 22*