

FROM THE EDITORS

DIGNITY OR THE PERSON'S INNER WORTH

In the culture of today the concept of dignity tends to be invoked rather than explained. We repeatedly hear about instances of “dignity-violating” behaviors, about human dignity “taken away” from refugees, the slandered who have been deprived of their good name, the unemployed, the handicapped, and the socially excluded, among them those declaring that they are not heteronormative. The fact that the concept of dignity is brought up in a multitude of contexts and that it is used for the purpose of both defending and prohibiting exactly the same actions not infrequently renders it void: the notion of dignity recurs in public discourse, but it no longer explains anything. The conceptual havoc, however, must not be taken as the grounds on which we abandon the concept in question altogether: on the contrary, we need to consider the present terminological confusion as an incentive to restore the true meaning of dignity. The problem lies in that the object of the controversy is not only the contexts in which human dignity is denied, but also the meaning of the concept itself.

The Canadian psychologist Steven Pinker, famous for his book *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*,¹ is also the author of a subversively entitled article “The Stupidity of Dignity,”² where he openly rejects the idea that dignity be considered as the basic inviolable human value. In his opinion, it is the Christian tradition which is to blame for the erroneous tendency to attribute the status of being unconditional to the value of dignity. In order to support his claim that the concept of dignity is vague and relative Pinker describes contexts in which it happens to be—not unambiguously—invoked. Firstly, ascriptions of dignity vary with time and place: while in olden days certain attire or manners of food consumption were considered as undignified, today no one would take objections against them seriously. Secondly, one may readily relinquish one’s own dignity for the sake of some other, preferred

¹ See Steven P i n k e r, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019).

² See Steven P i n k e r, “The Stupidity of Dignity,” *The New Republic*, 28 May 2008, *The New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/64674/the-stupidity-dignity>.

goods, for instance by agreeing to be strip-searched during security control or to undergo a colonoscopy. Thirdly and lastly, invoking the dignity of some may involve harming and denying the dignity of others. Indeed, history shows that political and religious oppression is not infrequently continued under the guise of defending the dignity of a state, a leader or a religious faith. All such facts make Pinker conclude that the concept of dignity is practically useless. Thus he calls it a “phenomenon of human perception.”³ To prove his point, he draws an analogy: “Just as the smell of baking bread triggers a desire to eat it, and the sight of a baby’s face triggers a desire to protect it, the appearance of dignity triggers a desire to esteem and respect the dignified person.”⁴

One might probably point to many other contexts in which human dignity is invoked. For instance, we may speak about a dignified behavior, about treating others with dignity, about receiving honors or destroying someone’s dignity, about someone losing their dignity or restoring it. Whereas Cicero believed that a person’s dignity is based on the acknowledgment she receives from others due to her merits,⁵ Thomas Hobbes questioned the contingency of a person’s dignity upon her worth. In his opinion, the person’s worthiness is different from her worth or merit and it consists in “a particular power, or ability for that, whereof [the person] is said to be worthy.”⁶ Thus the worthiest person to be a judge is one who is “best fitted”⁷ for it, and worthiest of riches is the person “that has the qualities most requisite for the well using them.”⁸ What such an understanding most significantly implies is that dignity is always attributed to a human being based on his or her ability, which implies that whenever a person manifests no ability, no dignity shall be attributed to her. Declaring that a person is worthy of something amounts to saying that she is capable of something, and the basis of her capability is certain qualities she exhibits. In saying that someone is worthy of an office he or she holds, we in a way combine the two understandings of dignity described above, namely, the person’s capability of holding an office in question and the perfection of her merits. However, both concepts imply that dignity is relative. Interestingly, Hobbes’s standpoint corresponds to what Maria Ossowska describes as linking the notion of dignity to that of personality: in this sense dignity is contingent upon the person’s moral attitudes. And again, dignity in this sense

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ See Marcus Tullius C i c e r o, *On Moral Duties (De Officiis)*, trans. Andrew P. Peabody (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1887), 33 (Liberty Fund: The Online Library of Liberty, http://files.libertyfund.org/files/542/Cicero_0041-01_EBk_v6.0.pdf).

⁶ [Thomas H o b b e s], *Hobbes’s Leviathan*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1965, 74.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

may be gained as much as it can be lost.⁹ In the light of the above, Pinker's claim that the concept of dignity as such is ambiguous turns out to be by no means insightful. Yet it is important to note that, among the various meanings of dignity he discusses, he does not include the one which is directly related to the fact that humans are rational and free beings by nature.

Dignity conceived as a correlate of personality or of the office held is ascribed to a human person by virtue of her inner or outer qualities. However, the values considered in both cases as "dignity-triggering" (for instance, the person's moral attitude or her capabilities) are so described because of the inner worth of the person, and therefore they are contingent upon it. This is by no means to say that they are of no significance to the person: on the contrary, they are significant to her by the power of the fact that they contribute to the shaping of both her inner goodness and the good actions she performs. Yet one cannot say that exhibiting "dignity-triggering" values exhausts the essence of the dignity specific to the human person. There are human beings among us who—due to mental disability—are incapable of shaping their character and do not manifest traits or gifts which would earn them respect in the public square. Neither are they capable of rational or free self-expression, or of acting as autonomous subjects, and yet we can still say that each of them is "one of us." There are also those who are absolutely capable of earning social respect, but do not wish to do so: instead they become vile, and their communities seek for ways to protect themselves from their depraved actions, claiming such individuals do not deserve to be called human. And yet even each delinquent among us is simultaneously "one of us" and will remain "one of us" even though the common opinion might be that he or she has "trampled" on his or her dignity. Once we recognize that dignity is the person's inner worth, we cannot but concede that human beings are bearers of dignity as long as they live.

Thus we have in mind one thing while applying the concept of dignity to human actions and describing them as dignified or undignified, and a different one whenever we point to the fundamental worth of human beings which springs from their rational and free nature enabling them to act and making them transcend the existing reality. A human being is "but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but this is a thinking reed."¹⁰

⁹ See Maria O s s o w s k a, *Moral Norms: A Tentative Systematization*, trans. Irena Gułowska (Warszawa, Amsterdam, New York and Oxford: PWN–Polish Scientific Publishers and North-Holland, 1980), 54–57.

¹⁰ Blaise P a s c a l, *Pensées*, 347, trans. William Finlayson Trotter (n.p.: Global Grey, 2021), 70.

“Humanity itself is a dignity,”¹¹ writes Immanuel Kant, and the word “itself” points to the fact that humanity is a dignity regardless of the ways in which we partake of its potential. Dignity is a value which does not have a price or an equivalent and, as such, cannot be replaced by anything.¹² The inalienable dignity inherent in a human person is the basis of the person’s inner worth.¹³ It is not that we have dignity because we exhibit some trait; rather, we have dignity because of who we are. Dignity conceived as the person’s inner worth cannot be rid of, neither can it be taken away from anyone. Probably the strongest emphasis on dignity as inherent in a human being can be found in the thought of Karol Wojtyła, who writes: “The ‘dignity’ of man as person means above all a property or fundamental quality—and in this sense the ‘value’ of the person as such: a value which belongs to man because he is a person and for which, therefore, man ought to strive.”¹⁴ Thus dignity is the person’s other name. The pricelessness of the human being, or the person, consists in that ultimately it is to her that all the values refer and that none of them can ever become an “equivalent” of her inner worth. It was precisely for that reason that Dietrich von Hildebrand called the person “Träger der sittlichen Werte,”¹⁵ the bearer of moral values: the pricelessness of the human being, or the person, consists in that ultimately it is the human being to whom all the values will always refer and none of them will ever become an “equivalent” of the inner worth of the human being conceived as person.

Since dignity is the person’s inner worth, we tend to speak about respecting rather than actualizing it.¹⁶ While wicked actions can be described as actions against dignity, they cannot violate the inner worth of the person against whom they are intended. Respect for the person’s dignity is tantamount to respect for her subjectivity. Although the scorned ones, or those who are excluded or misjudged, are treated in an undignified way, they do not lose their dignity. This, however, does not mean that they remain unharmed. On the contrary, they are deeply harmed, because their right to self-determination, which belongs to them by the power of who they are, is denied. The harm they suffer

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, 462, trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1964), 127.

¹² See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:434, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42.

¹³ See Kant, *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, 435, 97.

¹⁴ Karol Wojtyła [Pope John Paul II], *Man in the Field of Responsibility*, trans. Kenneth W. Kemp and Zuzanna Maślanka Kieroń (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 2011), 36.

¹⁵ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9, *Moralia* (Regensburg: Verlag Josef Habel, 1980), 102–3.

¹⁶ See Robert Spaemann, “O pojęciu godności człowieka,” in *Granice: O etycznym wymiarze działania*, trans. Jarosław Merecki (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2001), 162. See also Robert Spaemann, *Grenzen: Zur ethischen Dimension des Handelns* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2001).

is irreparable if their lives are taken from them, because it is only when they are alive that they can express their subjectivity. Yet even taking a person's life cannot deprive her of her dignity. Throughout history people have given their lives to remain faithful to their beliefs, trusting that it is the only way to preserve their dignity. In such cases people choose dignity over any other value and they stay loyal to it.

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