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Philosophy and Theology: Reflections on Dignity

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PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Discussions about dignity continue unabated. For some authors, the ambiguity of dignity is part of the strength of this ethical concept. Glenn Hughes suggests that an “intrinsically heuristic concept means that [the concept] refers to an intelligible reality of which we have some understanding, but whose full or complete content remains, and will always remain to some degree, unknown to us.”¹ Dignity is a heuristic concept that can never be fully known, in part because the human person is ultimately a mystery.

Because we have some understanding of who we are individually and as human beings, the concept of human dignity is not without content. But just as we never fully understand ourselves or other human beings, we also never fully understand human dignity.

This line of thinking can be theologically developed. If we are made in God’s image and likeness, then we must always remain at least somewhat unable to be fully comprehended. In the *Summa contra gentiles* and elsewhere, St. Thomas Aquinas taught that God cannot be fully comprehended. In this life, we cannot fully comprehend God because our understanding of who God is comes from the effects that God brings into being. These effects allow us to partially but never fully understand the First Cause. But even in the life to come, the blessed in heaven do not fully comprehend God, because only an infinite Intellect can comprehend the Infinite Being of God. Even in heaven, only a Divine Mind can understand perfectly the Divine Being. Of course, it does not follow from this that the blessed in heaven or the faithful on earth can know nothing about God. However, the practice of apophatic or negative theology reminds us of the fragility of our knowledge of God.

¹ Glenn Hughes, “The Concept of Dignity in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39.1 (March 2011): 8.

If our knowledge of God is incomplete, fragile, and subject to development, then so too our knowledge of the human person made in God's image must be incomplete, fragile, and subject to development. Human dignity necessarily involves the human person, so our understanding of human dignity as well never reaches perfection.

In his article "Should Inherent Human Dignity Be Considered Intrinsically Heuristic?," Bharat Ranganathan argues that this ambiguity causes serious problems for dignity as a bulwark for human rights.² To the degree that a particular theological or metaphysical basis is given for human dignity, consensus for human dignity and therefore human rights is eroded. Moreover, if we cannot disambiguate human dignity, then we cannot use it to disambiguate various possible human rights.

Ranganathan concerns are well placed. It may be that speaking about the theological basis for dignity undermines the usefulness of the concept when addressing particular audiences. A pluralistic, secular audience will be left unpersuaded by a grounding of dignity in any particular theological or metaphysical framework. This weakness, though, is shared by all particular outlooks and conceptions. A utilitarian approach leaves the Kantian cold, and the Kantian approach provokes Aristotelian rejection. The fact that a particular theological or metaphysical basis for dignity is not shared by everyone counts against it as much as against any other justification that is also not shared by everyone. Nevertheless, it is wise to consider the audience to which one is speaking. As Aquinas notes in the *Summa contra gentiles*, when arguing with Christians, appeal can be made to the New Testament. In arguing with Jewish believers, appeal can be made to the Hebrew Scriptures. In arguing with non-believers, appeal can be made only to reason.

Ranganathan is ultimately right that dignity cannot serve as useful in contemporary debate unless it is disambiguated. Fortunately, this work of clarifying various senses of the term has been carefully done by Daniel Sulmasy. In his article "The Varieties of Human Dignity: A Logical and Conceptual Analysis," Sulmasy distinguishes three senses of dignity—intrinsic, attributed, and inflorescent.³ Once he clarifies the distinctions between these senses of the term and establishes the proper logical relationship among them, Sulmasy shows that "dignity" is not hopelessly ambiguous and therefore is not useless in bioethical debates.

To say someone has intrinsic dignity is to claim that the person has worth, value, and stature simply in virtue of being human. This dignity cannot be lost but rather remains as long as the human being remains. Just as every single living human being has the biological quality of being a mammal, so too every single living human being has the ethical quality of intrinsic dignity. Intrinsic dignity does not rely on the choices of anyone, but is something that remains whether or not someone is recognized to have it.

² Bharat Ranganathan, "Should Inherent Human Dignity Be Considered Intrinsically Heuristic?," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42.4 (2014): 770–775.

³ Daniel Sulmasy, "The Varieties of Human Dignity: A Logical and Conceptual Analysis," *Medicine, Health Care, and Philosophy* 16.4 (2013): 937–944.

Attributed dignity is something that human beings confer on one another by choice. If Princeton grants an honorary doctorate to a benefactor, the university enhances the attributed dignity of the benefactor. On the other hand, a jailer might undermine the attributed dignity of his captives by feeding them only dog food or forcing them to parade around naked.

Finally, what Sulmasy calls inflorescent dignity consists in the well-being and flourishing of the person in question. When human beings live lives in which they are accorded respect and enjoy good health, warm friendships, and the deepening of knowledge, they enjoy inflorescent dignity. Dignity as flourishing depends in part on choice but also in part on circumstances beyond the power of human choice.

None of these three uses of the word “dignity” is the correct usage, but each sense of the term may be properly used in different contexts and for different purposes. Yet the various senses of the term “dignity” on Sulmasy’s view are logically and linguistically related, with the intrinsic sense being the prior sense of the term.

Sulmasy’s thesis is that attributed and inflorescent dignity presupposes both logically and linguistically the intrinsic sense of dignity. His disambiguation of the term “dignity” is valuable, but the argument he gives for the thesis is overly complex, consisting of nine numbered considerations and many subdivisions.

If I have understood his arguments correctly, they might be briefly summarized in the following way. Attributed dignity presupposes intrinsic dignity because we only attribute dignity to beings that we have already picked out as having intrinsic value. Inflorescent dignity presupposes intrinsic dignity because if the being in question is ultimately unimportant (lacking intrinsic dignity), then its flourishing is likewise ultimately unimportant.

If this construal of Sulmasy’s argument is correct, then I do not think it is a sound argument. Attributed dignity may be conferred (as by the granting of an honorary degree) on someone who is not recognized as having intrinsic dignity. Consider, for example, a racist provost who wants to shore up his image as being against racism, so he gives an honorary doctorate to an African-American professor at an Ivy League college. The provost might both hold that people of color do not have intrinsic value and also authorize the conferral of this attributed dignity to the professor. Consider too any philosopher who denies that any human being has intrinsic dignity, but who thinks that dignity only arises at some point in human development, such as at viability, sentience, or birth. That philosopher also is perfectly capable of performing acts which bestow attributed dignity on others. Similar examples could be provided to indicate that inflorescent dignity also does not depend upon intrinsic dignity.

I wish Sulmasy had spent greater time in this article, perhaps he does in other writings, explaining the justification for intrinsic dignity. He holds that intrinsic dignity arises because of the law-like generalizations, typical features, and natural history of natural kinds, but it is not entirely clear to me how these considerations establish the conclusion that all human beings have intrinsic dignity. Sulmasy writes, “There might be those who would claim that only a morally indefensible speciesist bias could lead one to make distinctions in value among living things based on the

observation of a gradation in the intrinsic value of biological natural kinds by virtue of increasing phylogenetic complexity.”⁴

Can there be gradations among things with intrinsic value? Sulmasy appears to have in mind the idea that human beings have intrinsic value but that, say, cats also have intrinsic value but less intrinsic value than humans. For this reason, it is wrong to kill a cat without justification and it is wrong to kill a woman without justification, but it is much worse to kill a woman than a cat.

By contrast, Sherif Girgis argues that “person” in the moral sense cannot be a matter of degree, because if you matter not just instrumentally but intrinsically, if your well-being counts as an ultimate reason for action, then there cannot really be degrees of its counting.⁵ On this understanding of intrinsic value, intrinsic value provides an ultimate reason for action that need not be grounded in any further justification. But if we understand intrinsic value in this sense, then it is hard to see how there could be gradations in intrinsic value.

I believe both Sulmasy and Girgis would agree to the following. If something has intrinsic value, then to use it simply as a means is to make a moral mistake. It is to treat someone who should be respected as an end, having value in himself or herself, as if the person were merely a tool with instrumental value. Immanuel Kant’s formulation of respecting humanity as end in itself articulates this moral principle: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.” When someone acts in the opposite way, treating things that are mere means as if these things were ends in themselves, the mistake is apparent. Imagine someone who set up his whole life in order to worship a mallet. Honoring the hammer, celebrating the nail driver, and contemplating its fine craftsmanship were the source and summit of his life. First thought of the day? Of the hammer. Last thought before bed? Hammer time. He sacrifices his own well-being and the well-being of other people all for the sake of the hammer. It is no less mad to treat a person—an end in himself—as if he or she were a thing. To act in either way is to confuse what is merely a means with what is an end. For this reason, both Aquinas and Kant agree that to act immorally is always to act irrationally.

Like Sulmasy, Carlo Leget also seeks to disambiguate dignity.⁶ Leget proposes three definitions of dignity: (1) social position, (2) intrinsic quality, and (3) dignity as experience—a purely subjective notion which “rests entirely on what individuals say they feel.”⁷ He then critiques each definition. Much of his analysis is sound. For example, Leget correctly notes that the problem with dignity-as-experience is that people can have mistaken views of themselves, as when a dangerously thin girl

⁴ Ibid., 943.

⁵ Sherif Girgis, “Equality and Moral Worth in Natural Law Ethics and Beyond,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 59.2 (2014): 143–162.

⁶ Carlo Leget, “Analyzing Dignity: A Perspective from the Ethics of Care,” *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 16.4 (November 2013): 945–952.

⁷ Ibid., 947.

thinks that she is fat. However, when Leget turns to critiquing intrinsic dignity, his analyses are less persuasive.

The problems with intrinsic dignity, in Leget's view, include the following:

Intrinsic dignity ... in Stoic, Christian and Kantian philosophy ... was used to divide the world into those rational and nonrational beings. Obviously this clarity has a price to be paid by both human beings whose rationality is compromised and higher mammals who display forms of social and rational behavior that we are still trying to understand.⁸

These considerations do not in fact undermine the notion of intrinsic dignity. If human beings have intrinsic dignity, then human beings who are compromised in terms of the exercise of their rationality are not compromised in terms of their dignity. An intrinsic quality is a quality that cannot be lost so long as the being in question continues to exist. Having sides is intrinsic to being a triangle, so as long as a triangle exists, a being with sides exists. Higher mammals, such as dolphins or great apes, also do not pose a challenge to the notion of intrinsic dignity. Such beings may have intrinsic dignity or such beings may not have it. We can have a fruitful argument about such matters. The fact that there are marginal cases in which it is unclear whether or not the concept applies does nothing to undermine the concept. It is unclear and we may never know whether at this instance we have an odd or an even number of hairs on our head, but this fact does not mean that the concepts of odd and even numbers are themselves fuzzy.

Leget continues his critique of intrinsic dignity:

A second problem, put forward by those who advocate a strong emphasis on experienced dignity, is that the idea of intrinsic dignity can work as an intellectual prison that may deny the experiences of people. If I feel that because of a fatal disease my dignity as a human person is compromised to such a degree that I see the continuation of my life as a hell but I live in a cultural context that forbids the termination of my life because of my dignity as a human being, I may feel held captive in life against my own will.⁹

Advocates of intrinsic dignity can push back on this argument by noting that the fact that people have intrinsic dignity does not deny the experiences of people who feel they have lost their dignity as experienced. "Dignity" is used in two different senses in such cases, but the senses are related. Because people have intrinsic dignity, it matters morally what happens to them. If a person feels degraded because of loss of control or other factors that make them feel subhuman, this matters precisely because they still have intrinsic dignity. If the person really no longer counted morally, then we would not concern ourselves with their feelings or their experience of losing their sense of dignity. Moreover, some people have accepted the idea of intrinsic dignity and have also believed that intentional killing is justified. I am not sure these two ideas are ultimately compatible, but the earliest advocates of intrinsic dignity, the Stoics, also did not oppose suicide.

⁸ Ibid., 949.

⁹ Ibid.

And yet other authors have pointed to an inconsistency between championing autonomy on the one hand and undermining intrinsic dignity on the other. Colin Bird points out this connection in the thought of Alan Gewirth: “Every human agent must attribute worth to his purposes ... [because he] regards his purposes as good according to whatever criteria enter into his purposes.”¹⁰ If an agent sees his or her goals as worthwhile, implicitly that agent is also affirming some sense of personal worth. The agent is the source of the action. If the action is valuable, the agent must also be valuable. Gewirth puts the points as follows: “They are *his* purposes, and they are worth attaining because *he* is worth sustaining and fulfilling, so that he has what for him is a justified sense of his own worth.”¹¹ The conclusion is that the “generic purposiveness” of rational action, just as such, “underlies the ascription of inherent dignity to all agents” (including oneself).¹² If this reasoning is correct, we have new support for the thesis of Sulmasy, namely, that intrinsic dignity undergirds other senses of dignity. Why should we respect autonomy? The autonomy of a person matters only if the person matters. So it is not, in the metaphysical and moral order, that autonomy gives rise to the dignity of persons, but rather that the dignity of persons gives rise to the value of autonomy. But this suggests that efforts such as those of Mary Ann Warren, Michael Tooley, Alberto Giubilini, and Francesca Minerva to ground the value of the human being in the autonomy of the human being are getting things backward.

Leget continues his critique of intrinsic dignity as follows:

A third problem focusing on intrinsic dignity alone is that paradoxically it may contribute to cleaning the consciousness of people and abstaining from moral action when it is urgent. If the intrinsic dignity of people cannot be taken away it may become an excuse for not helping them in need, e.g. when they are considered to be far away and not part of our own culture. Whatever famine or poverty people may suffer, their dignity can never be taken away from them.¹³

This concern, I think, is also not such a problem. Intrinsic dignity cannot be lost, which means that whoever has it is the subject of moral rights and deserves to be treated in a way that accords with their moral status. But this means that the notion of intrinsic dignity is not an invitation to inaction in the moral realm. Rather, the intrinsic dignity of each human being provides a reason for action to benefit every human being. Suffering and poverty do not take away the intrinsic dignity of people, but suffering and poverty invite upright people to care about the poor and the suffering and therefore seek to relieve their plight.

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¹⁰ Colin Bird, “Dignity as a Moral Concept,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 30.1–2 (January 2013): 150–176.

¹¹ Alan Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 168–169.

¹² *Ibid.*, 169.

¹³ Leget, “Analyzing Dignity,” 949.