HUMAN DIGNITY AND POLITICAL CRITICISM

Many, including Marx, Rawls, and the contemporary “Black Lives Matter” movement, embrace the ambition to secure terms of coexistence in which the worth of people's lives becomes a lived reality rather than an empty boast. This book asks whether, as some believe, the philosophical idea of human dignity can help achieve that ambition. Offering a new fourfold typology of dignity concepts, Colin Bird argues that human dignity can perform this role only if certain traditional ways of conceiving it are abandoned. Accordingly, Bird rejects the idea that human dignity refers to the inherent worth or status of individuals, and instead reinterprets it as a social relation, constituted by affects of respect and the modes of mutual attention which they generate. What emerges is a new vision of human dignity as a vital political value, and an arresting vindication of its role as an agent of critical reflection on politics.

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It is said, quite correctly, that in antiquity there existed no such notion as respect for a person. The ancients thought far too clearly to entertain such a confused idea.

**Simone Weil**

The only intelligible language in which we converse with one another consists of our objects in their relation to each other. We would not understand a human language and it would remain without effect. By one side it would be recognized and felt as being a request, an entreaty, and therefore a humiliation, and consequently uttered with a feeling of shame, of degradation. By the other side it would be regarded as impudence or lunacy and rejected as such. We are to such an extent estranged from man’s essential nature that the direct language of this essential nature seems to us a violation of human dignity, whereas the estranged language of material values seems to be the well-justified assertion of human dignity that is self-confident and conscious of itself.

**Karl Marx**
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When we follow the threads of political argument dominant in the new millennium back to their root assumptions, we sooner or later encounter claims about “human dignity” and the “respect” it is supposed to command. These categories are now the dominant vehicle for expressing a commitment to humanitarian improvement, pretending to a significance at once universal and foundational for late modern politics and its avowed project of civilization. Social criticism and protest, democratic deliberation, as well as our efforts to manage our deepest ethical disagreements now all seem unthinkable apart from these categories. Our very consciousness of ourselves as enjoying legal, moral, and civic standing today speaks the language of respect and human dignity. Few would find it easy to explain the significance of other key political concepts – justice, freedom, autonomy, impartiality, reciprocity, equality, rights, property, cruelty, tolerance, civility – without at some point speaking of the “equal respect due to all,” the “dignity of the human person,” the importance of “mutual respect,” and so forth. Today, it seems, no social and political practice can vindicate itself except before the tribunal of human dignity.

Confronted with the charge that political “theorizing” had little application to political “practice,” the Abbé Sieyès is said to have offered a memorable response: “Theories,” he reportedly replied, “are the practice of centuries; and their practice is the theory of the passing moment.”¹ The special political relevance enjoyed in modern times by concepts of dignity and respect perfectly illustrates Sieyès’s point. The belief that human dignity consists in a certain kind of self-disciplining autonomy that commands “mutual respect” is by now a fundamental presupposition of our social forms and ethical consciousness. Our legal systems reflect it, and our moral codes lay claim to it: no adequate account of these and other well-established social practices could ignore it. That belief informs our resentments and feelings of indignation; our attitudes to envy and social comparison; our understandings of certain public complaints as urgent and others as comparatively trivial; our investments in norms

of personal responsibility, independence, and equality; our recognition and experience of abuse, degradation, insult, dehumanization, and humiliation; our feelings of acceptance and rejection; and how we encounter ourselves and others as centers of “worth.” In these ways, our consciousness of the respect we are owed and the dignity we possess reflects a Sieyèsian “practice of centuries,” while simultaneously rendering “passing moments” intelligible as episodes of fulfillment or aberration.

Sieyès’s brilliant insight not only captures the profound interconnection of theory and practice but also explains why it is often difficult to understand socially dominant ideas from a position of critical detachment. The overwhelming cultural credibility of what I will call “Dignitarian Humanism” is beyond dispute. But how far, and when, is it deserved? If so, in what form and to what effect? We cannot hope to answer these questions without achieving a measure of critical distance on its distinctive commitments.

This book attempts to step back and open a fresh angle on this dignitarian humanist orthodoxy, and on the social practices it purports to legitimate and cast into doubt. More specifically, it is concerned with its place, character, strengths, and limitations as a guiding framework for critical reflection about politics. The prestige and currency of dignitarian humanism are as obvious in the writings of recent moral and political theorists as they are in the wider public culture. What follows is an assessment of these efforts to put dignitarian humanist ideas to a distinctively philosophical use in political criticism. What theoretical work can they really perform in political reflection? Are they ever anything more than rhetorical ornaments on arguments whose real substance lies elsewhere? Do the intellectuals who today earnestly mobilize these elevated categories indulge a naïve idealism that has no place in sophisticated political understanding? Are they victims of an ideology?

"Dignitarian humanism" is a term of my own devising, and does not – so far as I am aware – appear in the writings of any political theorist. I find it a helpful term for capturing a set of loosely affiliated normative postures that recur in much contemporary political thought, thereby lending large sectors of it a distinctive character. Later, I attempt to detail commitments that typify dignitarian humanist varieties of political theory. However, pulling a range of political arguments together under an artificial covering label of this kind may encourage a misconception that it is important to preempt at the outset. Specifically, the project does not assume that ideas about dignity and respect crop up in political reflection always in a single, simple way. Nor need it presuppose that "dignitarian humanism" is an internally coherent view to be accepted or rejected as an integrated package, so that a critique of the sort offered in this book must seek to overturn it, en bloc, from some adversarial external position.

To the contrary, this book offers a critique in the proper sense of that term, aiming to clarify and vindicate as much as reject. Among other things, it hopes to discriminate between those elements of dignitarian humanist political
thinking worth keeping and those that may be more strained or even politically damaging. Such a critique is quite compatible with a sympathetic appreciation for leading dignitarian commitments. And, in accepting that they admit of a variety of uses and interpretations, it presupposes that those commitments are both diverse and complex. Exhibiting that complexity and understanding its implications for various political arguments are accordingly among the book’s main preoccupations.

Still, and keeping these provisos very firmly in mind, it will be useful to provide a provisional summary of this book’s critical target. For the purposes of this book, then, dignitarian humanist varieties of political theory are characteristically committed to the following:

1. Human agents have inherent dignity, not price; their “worth” is therefore of a special kind, distinct from and irreducible to exchange value, preference, utility, and considerations of instrumental rationality; at the same time, human “worth” is in principle an entirely secular, nonreligious, category.

2. This inherent “dignity” or worth is not a value to be promoted but rather an object of respect and disrespect; the relevant respect/disrespect is disclosed in visible forms of treatment that express certain inner attitudes toward other human beings.

3. This respectful treatment is owed to persons as such; the respect at issue is therefore not like that commanded by specific individuals for particular attributes (achievements, moral virtue, prowess, etc.) but is an entitlement owed equally and unconditionally to all.

4. The dignity and worth of human individuals is bound up with their autonomy and independence as persons and so the respect it commands requires an acknowledgment of their equal status as free agents.

5. The dignity and worth of individuals condition not only the treatment they must receive from others but also reflect vital human needs, including the preservation of self-respect and avoidance of self-contempt, the ability to affirm one’s worth, importance and status, and to obtain appropriate recognition in the eyes of potentially oppressive, limiting, others.

6. All of these (points 1–5) are central to our concept of persons’ public worth and standing. As such:
   a. these stipulations jointly define a very basic, uncontroversial set of standards that public institutions must at all costs satisfy; they therefore comprise a privileged, authoritative critical standpoint
      i. from which existing political arrangements should be impartially judged legitimate or wanting; and
      ii. that excludes at least some other purported critical standards (e.g., utilitarian ones) that might be applied to assess the legitimacy of social and political arrangements with different results;
b. they are distinct from the forms of standing and worth relevant in private settings, connected to forms of love, friendship, loyalty, beneficence, concern, social and professional recognition, appreciation, and so on.

I stress again that this is a preliminary outline that will have to be elaborated, qualified, and refined in due course and whose internal coherence is not being presumed. Obvious ambiguities in, and questions about, the formulations mentioned above (often giving rise to disagreements between different philosophers) will require careful consideration and in some cases radical revision. However, even if it is a ladder we will eventually have to kick away, it gives us enough height to spy the road ahead.

Our question, stated very broadly, is the adequacy of point 6(a), mentioned earlier. Should we agree that a principle of respect for human dignity can serve as an impartial critical standard by which political philosophers can reach authoritative judgments about the merits and legitimacy of political arrangements? If so, how, and to what effect?

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