

## *Human Dignity and Human Being*

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The question of human dignity is surely inseparable from the question of what it is to be human. This seems to be most obviously so inasmuch as the concept of human dignity is closely related to the idea of human worth – to attend to human dignity is to attend to the value or significance that belongs to human being, but to attend to this is already to presuppose an understanding of the nature of human being, of what human being is. Yet few discussions of human dignity make this connection a focus for discussion in itself – rather than probe the question of human dignity as a question about human being, the question is treated in a way that often seems to imply a severance from such ‘ontological’ concerns.

That human dignity is often approached as if it were a sui generis concept partly reflects a tendency within the ethical and political thinking that derives from Western liberalism to eschew ontological questioning as inherently problematic, and to look instead to more procedurally oriented conceptions, but it probably also reflects a more general contemporary discomfort with notions of human being or human nature as such – whether because such notions are thought to be unduly universalist, incapable of satisfactory elucidation, or because of a rejection, within those modes of thinking influenced by deconstructionist or post-modern thinking, of the ‘humanism’ with which they are associated. The clear implication here, of course, is that the very connection I have asserted as so obvious and self-evident is itself a contentious one – perhaps the question of dignity has nothing whatsoever to do either with the nature of what it is to be human or with the specifically human at all.

In respect of this latter claim – the denial that dignity has any to do with the specifically human as such – it is certainly true that there is a sense of dignity that is broader than just that which is applicable to the human, and some might even want to claim that some sense of dignity might extend beyond the animal as well (as one might talk, for instance, of the dignity of nature). Yet in asserting a connection between the question of human dignity and the question of human being, I am not asserting any necessary restriction on the idea of dignity as such, but instead wish to direct attention to a fairly simple and straightforward point: how we think about the dignity that is ours (whoever ‘we’ may be) depends very much on our conception of ourselves. In this respect, my own assertion of the necessary implication of the ontological here can be seen as simply an assertion of the interconnectedness of our concepts and of our thinking.

The most common way in which the idea of human dignity is currently articulated, in fact, is in terms that correspond to a very specific understanding of human being – in terms of dignity as a matter of individual, rational autonomy, and of the human being as an autonomous, rational individual. In this respect, what counts as a diminution in human autonomy – a diminution in the capacity of human beings rationally to make their own decisions and to determine their own lives – is ipso facto a diminution in human dignity and in human being. Although the notion of autonomy has become such an integral part of contemporary discourse, the its historical origins are often forgotten or overlooked. Yet the focus on autonomy arises largely out of the thinking associated with the Enlightenment, and the paradigmatic of this conception of the human and of human dignity is to be found in the work of Immanuel Kant, in works such as ‘What is Enlightenment’ and the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.

Kant had no qualms, however, about connecting the ethical with the ontological, the practical with the theoretical, and his understanding of

human being as essentially configured in relation to the rational will is a determining element in his ethical thought. In contemporary discussion, however, the ontological assumptions that may underlie the understanding of human dignity in terms of autonomy are not so clear nor are they typically made so explicit – and the idea that human dignity is a matter of human autonomy has become so commonplace that the fact that it is married to a specific conception of human being is often not remarked upon or discussed. Yet the conception of human being in terms of individual autonomy carries important implications, not least of which is the tendency for it to prioritise the individual, and individual capacities and attributes, over the social, cultural and historical situatedness of human being.

It is not that autonomy has no relevance to an understanding of human being, but rather that too great an emphasis on autonomy alone threatens to deliver a distorted picture of that in which human being actually consists. Who and what we are is not determined solely by our existence as independent beings, but is instead intertwined with the being of those others in relation to whom our lives are shaped, as well as with respect to the wider world in which our lives are played out – who and what we are is thus a matter of mutuality rather than simple autonomy. This is not merely a point that derives from the pragmatic reliance on others that is a part of our socialised mode of existence – the fact that, practically speaking, human life depends on cooperative relations with other human beings in order to satisfy basic needs of food, shelter and security – but rather reflects the way in which, at an even more fundamental level, the very possibility of grasping one's own individual being, and so of understanding oneself as having a life of one's own (something that is itself an essential element in the possibility of autonomous choice), itself depends on grasping the being of others and the being of things around one. In the work of the American philosopher Donald Davidson, this point is put in terms of the idea that there are three 'kinds' of

knowledge that are mutually implicated with one another: knowledge of self, knowledge of others, and knowledge of the world.<sup>1</sup> It is Davidson's contention that no one of these is possible without the others – knowledge of self, for instance, of one's own attitudes, feelings and so on, is thus interdependent with knowledge of others and with knowledge of the world. Moreover, while Davidson appears to couch this in epistemic terms, what is actually at issue goes beyond the merely epistemic – since who and what we are is so much bound up with our knowledge of ourselves, and since our knowledge of ourselves is interdependent with our knowledge of others and the world, so who and what we are is itself bound up with our knowledge of others and of the world..

The picture Davidson presents here is one that I have developed elsewhere in terms of the essentially 'topographical' character of human being, since one way of understanding the inter-relatedness that is at issue here is precisely in terms of a certain form of complex situatedness<sup>2</sup>. Rather than being somehow self-enclosed and separate, human being has to be understood in terms of its particular topos – in terms of the place in which it finds itself – a topos or place that is formed through the inter-relations between individuals and groups of individuals, between individuals and the environments and things that surround them, and between individuals and themselves. If we take such topographical inter-relation seriously then not only must it be seen as determining the structure of our epistemic lives, but our ethical lives as well. Indeed, we might say our ethical relations play out across the same three dimensions that Davidson also identifies – relation to self, to others, and to the world – and that these three dimensions of relation are also interdependent with one another.

It might be said, of course, that this is already to assume a relational conception of ethics, when such a conception remains contentious. Yet this relational conception follows more or less directly from the relational

conception of meaning and knowledge that is present in Davidson, and that can be seen to entail a relational conception of human being as such. Moreover, there are, in any case, independent reasons for thinking that ethics is itself essentially relational. At a very ordinary level, most key ethical notions – of honesty, trust, respect, and so on – are notions that have their primary application only in a relational, or more specifically, an interpersonal context, and this is perhaps reflected in a common tendency to think of as concerning our actions and judgements inasmuch as they affect others as well as ourselves. At a more philosophical level, the idea of a certain universality that attaches to ethical judgment, so that what I judge right for me ought to be consistent with the judgements I make about what is right for others (the idea given a very particular expression in Kant's famous Categorical Imperative – will only that which can be willed as a general law), can be seen to imply an interdependence of ethical judgment that mirrors the interdependence that obtains at, for instance, the level of knowledge. One might object that the relationality that appears here is a relationality that derives primarily from the need for consistency, but even if that were to be admitted, it would be a relationality nonetheless.

If we think of ethics, and so also human being, in these interdependent, relational terms, such then ethical thinking and acting will always involve thinking and acting in ways that are attentive to the complex set of relations in the midst of which our own human lives are constituted. The idea of autonomy is not rendered irrelevant by such an account, since the importance of autonomy can be seen to derive from the importance of the relation we have to ourselves as one of the three dimensions of human being, knowledge and judgement, and also from the very topographical character of the tripartite structure that is at issue here. Indeed, one way of thinking of autonomy is in terms of the self-determination that occurs when an entity or structure operates according to the principles that belong to it as such. If the

principles that determine human being are indeed principles of mutuality or relationality that place human thinking and acting in an ever-present relation of interdependence with others and with the world, then to think and act autonomously will not be to think and act in separation from others and the world, but to think and act in a way that is attentive to them. There is, then, a sense of autonomy that is quite consistent with mutuality – but this only becomes evident when we recognise the way in which the very notion of autonomy itself has to be understood against a certain ‘ontological’ background. The nature of the autonomy that belongs to human being depends upon the nature of the human being that is autonomous.

The conception of ethical and human life that emerges here is an especially interesting one we return to the focus on human dignity. For if human being is indeed relational in the way that I have sketched, then human dignity will be similarly relational in character. What this means, first of all, is that dignity will play out across the three dimensions of relationship that are at issue here: there is a sense of dignity that obtains in terms of the sense of worth that we have in relation to ourselves, a sense of dignity that we have of ourselves in relation to others, and so also a sense of the worth of others in relation to ourselves, and a sense of the worth of ourselves in relation to the wider world, and of that wider world as it stands in relation to us. That dignity is expressed here in terms of a ‘relation to’ (or ‘in mutuality with’) should not be taken to suggest that the dignity at issue does not belong to anything ‘in itself’, but rather that dignity always and only appears as something stands within a wider structure of relations since only then does something even appear.

While this relational conception of dignity means that dignity plays out across a number of different dimensions, it also means that no one dimension is completely determining either in affirming dignity or denying it. Dignity may be maintained even in cases where others deny or demean one’s dignity

simply because one's own dignity or worth is not solely dependent on what any other person, or group of persons, may think, judge or do in relation to one. The dignity that one can maintain in one's self, and through one's own sense of the dignity of others, can resist the indignity that others may attempt to impose – as we know from the experiences to be found within, for instance, the concentration camp, the internment camp and the prison.

Dignity can be retained even in the face of the fiercest assault. Indeed, one might argue that no human being can ever be said to lose all dignity. What is lost is the capacity to recognise or express one's own dignity, or to recognise the dignity of others. In this respect, given the relational conception of human being that I have advanced here, any assault on the dignity of another is also a diminution of one's own dignity. One may even say that an assault on the dignity of one is an assault on the dignity at all. To treat one human being as without dignity is to potentially deny the dignity of every human being, even one's own. This is perhaps part of the reason why it is so hard to think of dignity as attaching to the great evildoers of history – Hitler, Stalin, or even Martin Bryant. Their actions demean their own dignity even as they threaten the dignity of others.

Inasmuch as human dignity concerns human worth, then so it must have a specially significant role within the structure of ethical life. Ethics surely begins with the recognition that there is a question that can be asked about the propriety of action (or of certain attitudes or modes of comportment) that goes beyond mere issues of prudence or practicality. The difficulty is in understanding the nature of the question that could be at issue here. I want to suggest that what marks out the questions of ethics is that they are just those questions that concern the propriety of actions inasmuch as those actions affect our own worth as human beings or as persons. I say 'worth' here rather than, for instance, 'welfare' or 'well-being', since for welfare or well-being alone, or in the ordinary sense of these terms, to be

made primary would be to render obscure the distinction of the ethical from, for instance, the prudential. Inasmuch as the ethical is a distinct realm, then the ethical concerns our actions and judgements inasmuch as those actions and judgements affirm or deny the worth of ourselves, of others and of the wider world. The affirmation and maintenance of dignity can thus be understood as one crucial way of expressing that which must lie at the very heart of an ethical, which is to say also, a human life.

Inasmuch as human lives are lives whose meaning, indeed whose very character as human, derives from their relational character, then so the greatest threats to human dignity derive from those actions and circumstances that strip human lives of their relational connection – that disable the sense of relatedness to self, of relatedness to others and of relatedness to world. Such a stripping away of relations can occur through a loss of certain capacities to engage with others and with the world – through a loss of bodily capacities as well as of cognitive – but perhaps the greatest threat to the maintenance of a sense of human dignity is the experience of pain and suffering, and the humiliations, large and small, that may accompany such experience. Elaine Scarry has explored, in great detail, the way in which pain, particularly extreme or chronic pain, not only shatters our normal communicative relatedness with others, but also dissolves the ordinary distinctions of public and private, inner and outer, self and world, thereby threatening our capacity to maintain the relational structure of our lives. While such a threat to dignity may arise as a result of the contingencies of human life (as a result, for instance, whether directly or indirectly, of illness), it may also be deliberately inflicted, and in such cases the threat to dignity that operates through the dissolving of the relations in which an individual life is lived, is itself closely tied to the attempt to exercise coercion or control. Thus, to take just two examples: the operation of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and still today) depended on destroying

the ordinary relationships that make for meaningful human life and turning a human being into a mere commodity, a body to be used, traded, disposed of; the use of torture, whether through physical or psychological violence, whether in Guantanamo Bay or elsewhere, involves a similar denial of the dignity of the individual, operating through the destruction of the ordinary relations that form the individual life, reforming those relations according to the desires of the interrogator, dissolving the world and the individual along with it .<sup>3</sup>

In one sense, human dignity is preserved just so long as human life is preserved (although even in death, of course, the body can retain a dignity of its own). The dignity that belongs to a human life is not to be accounted in terms of the possession of any single capacity of characteristic, but refers us instead to the worth of a human life which is given only through the articulation of that life in relation to self, others and world. Dignity involves more than just autonomy, therefore, and we can readily identify instances (Jack Coulehan's essay above provides two excellent examples) in which a form of autonomy can be maintained and yet dignity can be compromised, while dignity can be maintained even though autonomy can be lost. Dignity is thus no less complex and multi-faceted than is a human life as such, and one cannot understand one without an understanding of the other. While human dignity may come to the forefront for those of us who find ourselves in situations in which the threat to human dignity is ever-present in situations of human suffering and distress, pain, debility or hardship, it is also at the centre of ethical life as such. The reason is simple: it is precisely the need to be attentive to human worth that is at the centre of ethical thought and action; and to be attentive to human worth is also to be attentive to the complex relatedness in which all human life consists; a relatedness that encompasses, not only ourselves, nor even

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<sup>1</sup> See Davidson, 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', in Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp.205-20.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Malpas, Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> See Elaine Scarry's account of the structure of torture in The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.27-59.