

Kant's *Würde* in the Post-WWII Era: The Vexed and Unfinished Triumph of Human Dignity

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In the contemporary discourse of human rights, “human dignity” looms large. It is enshrined in virtually all of the documents in the movement for securing, protecting and expanding the rights of all people around the globe. Surely its most canonical expression is to be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris, December, 1948. The Preamble declares: “[R]ecognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” And Article 1 reads: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

But despite its presence in this document and others like it, the concept of “human dignity” has never ceased to perplex those who try to pin it down. Moral philosophers especially continue to be vexed by its meaning and foundation. Indeed, there are some who simply declare it meaningless—a superfluous, useless concept that serves as mere window dressing to the more concrete, even measurable values of “rights” and “equality.” Even we non-philosophers might be excused for our confusion; for the word “dignity” suggests two, rather divergent meanings (or maybe I should say applications). At least until the eighteenth century, to say “dignity” was to assume a sense of distinction, hierarchy, and inequality. “Dignity” implied that some people had it, most did not. And common parlance preserves this meaning today. We routinely pronounce someone as “dignified,” or “undignified,” but in either case it implies that there are standards to which one should measure up. We denounce “indignities,” and pay ceremonial homage to “dignitaries,” people worthy of our esteem. We get “indignant,” when we (or others) are treated unfairly or inappropriately, which is to say in a manner incommensurate with our status or sense of self. In short, in all shades of meaning of these words related to “dignity” there is implied a sense of esteem, status, standards, or other indications of measuring against calibrated expectations. “Dignity” here suggests a scale of values. When the value is *human* dignity, however, its meaning undergoes a radical reversal. Traditionally a marker of hierarchy and inequality, dignity now modified becomes an ascription universally accorded, without prejudice or discrimination.

In most accounts, it is Immanuel Kant who provided the philosophical basis for this second understanding of “dignity” as a universal value, ascribed to all. In his *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), he dwells on “*Würde*,” taken to mean “dignity” in English; he uses it sixteen times in that work.¹ And he elaborates on its meaning accordingly: “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity... [T]hat which constitutes the condition under which something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative value, that is, a price, but an inner value, that is *dignity*.”² Human beings, rational and capable of moral behavior, should never be considered as a means to something else; this would be conferring upon them a price. Humans

¹ Rosen, *Dignity*, 20.

² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. & ed., Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42.

should only be acknowledged as ends to themselves; therefore as beings possessed of “dignity.” With this, Kant provided a justification for the subsequent deployment of “dignity” as meaning an ethical value ascribed to all human beings.³

My contribution to the workshop will be an essay exploring the fate of Kant’s understanding of “human dignity,” and especially in the post-WWII world. Interestingly, it does not find a continuous development in the nineteenth century. While striving for equality and the expansion of rights—in other words, the struggle for full citizenship—continues to constitute the agenda of countless movements, “dignity” as a universal value is rarely prominent. Rather, it is the dignity of various and particular kinds and groups of people—enslaved people, women, workers—which finds expression. In this sense, a crucial, though often muted value of the Enlightenment—that of universality—has less of an immediate afterlife than some conventional narratives of its fate would have it. Indeed, as is well-acknowledged, the liberal tradition in the nineteenth century was characterized as much by exclusion, and by an ambivalence about democratic demands, as it was by constitutionalism, liberty and individual rights.

My essay will explore why this changes in the years immediately after the Second World War. The stock explanation for embracing the universality of human dignity is the mass murder that characterized the conflict, and especially the Shoah. But in recent years, this assumption has been challenged especially by Samuel Moyn who in a series of extremely effective interventions not only argues against the effectiveness and durability of the post-war human rights turn (fair enough) but also that the vaunting of “rights” in general and “human dignity” in particular stemmed less from secular liberal sources than a resurgent, essentially conservative, Catholic intellectual movement (led in particular by Jacques Maritain). As partial evidence, he offers the letters solicited in the runup to the drafting of the Universal Declaration from a number of intellectuals and other prominent figures, which suggests a diversity of views, undermining the conventional notion that the human rights turn was based on a fundamentally liberal consensus.

What I will suggest, derived in part from a reading of these letters (available in a volume edited by Mark Goodale, with a Forward by Moyn, *Letters to the Contrary: A Curated History of the UNESCO Human Rights Survey*, Stanford UP, 2018), is that, despite a diversity of viewpoints, the presence of a consensus—narrow perhaps, but still valuable—over the importance and meaningfulness of “human dignity.” And this will allow me, in the latter (polemical?) part of this essay, to argue for a refurbishing of a sort of Enlightenment liberalism in the post-war era, which, despite its fragility and short afterlife, represents an accessible model for a reimagined liberalism in our day.

³ To be sure, Kant’s understanding of dignity was not unqualified in its reach. For one thing, he harbored squarely racist views. He ranked humans in a hierarchy of four categories: Europeans, Asians, Africans, and Native Americans, with the last two as “natural slaves.” So his sense of universality, as for others at the time, was brutally ethnocentric in its limits. On a more philosophical level, the Kant scholar Oliver Sensen convincingly argues that the philosopher’s understanding of “dignity” was fundamentally aspirational; in other words, it was not simply meant to ascribe equal worth to everyone, but rather to vaunt a value *achievable* by the moral beings we all are. Still, Kant’s articulation of this value—even as an ethical ideal—was historically significant in establishing a firm intellectual basis for dignity as ascribed everyone, not merely “dignitaries.” Sensen, “Kant’s Conception of Human Dignity,” *Kant-Studien* (September, 2009).