

PHILOSOPHER'S COLUMN

Dignity and the Good Life

One of the most striking features of twentieth-century humanism is its belief that dignity is a necessary condition of the good life. An individual is said to have dignity to the extent that he or she has reasonable power to control important aspects of his or her own life. This is dignity as self-possessed control. It consists not in having unlimited power but in having reasonable control over the significant aspects of one's life, as well as the oft-times necessary condition of not being treated disrespectfully. This sense of dignity is most commonly appealed to when the power to direct one's own life is being threatened or compromised. When autonomy is threatened, the corresponding notion of indignity comes to play a central role. Thus, we often say that "compulsory pregnancy is an indignity" or that "the ultimate indignity is to lack control over one's own life."

This characterization is obviously incomplete, for one might wish to distinguish between this and other senses of the word. Indeed, it would be disheartening to have dignity as self-possessed control confused with dignity as loftiness of style, worth, fortitude, or dignity by association (whereby an individual is accorded dignity just because he or she is a member of a uniquely rational or capable species).

The idea of dignity seems to be gaining moral force. The attractiveness of political democracy is, in part, due to the attractiveness of a system wherein, without exception, those who owe allegiance to the laws of the country are trained in the nature of the democratic process and have the right to vote and the right to participate in a process of genuine decision-making. An appeal to dignity is often used to justify conclusions about abortion and other matters of life and death. For example, the idea of dignity is often used to discredit

autonomy-denying treatment of patients, especially those who are terminally ill. This is what is meant when it is asserted that much of the treatment of dying patients is dehumanizing, or that attachments to catheters, pacemakers, monitors, and the rest often insults the dignity of the dying. An appeal to dignity as self-possessed control is also used to protest the dehumanizing conditions of poverty, racism, sexism, and inadequate health care.

Social scientists indirectly discuss this notion when they study the implications of not having the power or authority to guide and manage one's own life. Unhappy people, we are told, typically feel they have no control over their lives. On the other hand, happy people (especially the happiest) feel that they do have this control. In *The Pursuit of Happiness: Who Is Happy—and Why*, David G. Meyers claims that Americans who have a strong sense of control over their own lives and who feel satisfied with themselves are twice as likely to be very happy as the national average. Other thinkers stress not only the need for personal control but the need for control over the very destiny of the planet. In their epic work, *The Science of Life*, H. G. Wells, Julian S. Huxley, and G. P. Wells suggest that the human being "will survive only on one condition and that is that he must take control not only of his own destinies but of the whole of life." The implications of this Promethean stance are enormous, if not revolutionary. They provide not only an audacious way of looking at life but a basis upon which to build a more powerful "green ethic"—an ethic that includes all living things within the scope of its compassion.

There are, of course, dangers. In *The Arrogance of Humanism*, David Ehrenfeld warns us that the most sweeping and dubious humanist assumption is

that all problems are soluble by people. For it is one thing to want to control nature; it is another to believe that we are omnipotent. In addition, there are the incontrovertible problems of extreme forms of libertarianism. To say that freedom is a great social good and that dignity is a great personal good is not to say that they are the greatest of all goods, for there are such things as membership in a community as well as the virtues of creativity, caring and affection, intelligence and wisdom. Nor is it to say that freedom, the ideal of autonomy, and dignity are sufficient conditions for the best of human lives.

The evidence (albeit limited) indicates that those who best promote the welfare of humanity have freedom as neither the sufficient nor the overriding good. Instead they talk about the good life as being guided by intelligence (when intelligence is broadly understood as the combination of knowledge, receptivity to knowledge, and the capacity for problem solving) and inspired by supportive values (when the supportive values include empathy and sympathy, benevolence and beneficence, affection and love). They understand that great goods often collide and that, when the emphasis is primarily on self-love and atomistic selves, freedom often slides into a dangerous and self-indulgent egoism. This kind of altruistic humanism also has its risks. But to the extent it remembers that membership in a community and political freedom are two of the great social goods, and that the best of personal relations is based upon caring for others, as well as the enhancement of their dignity, it stands a better chance of not violating its birthright. *

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