

Why Persons Have Dignity

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IN ALL OF OUR PRO-LIFE WORK we constantly appeal to the dignity of persons, arguing that this dignity is violated by abortion, euthanasia, and other crimes against life. If persons had no dignity, then these forms of killing would be morally unobjectionable. But the dignity to which we appeal is usually taken for granted by us. In this paper I propose to stop taking it for granted and to reflect on it and try to give an account of it.

1. SOME PRELIMINARIES

It may be useful for the pro-life cause to discuss the beginning and the ending of personal dignity in a human being. We all know how much mischief is caused by those who argue that a human being in the womb is not a person and so lacks the dignity of being a person. But I will not address the questions of beginning and ending.¹ My question today is rather this one: Granted that a given human person exists, why do we recognize dignity in the person? By trying to answer this question we gain something of great importance for our pro-life commitment. This will become especially clear when we encounter Peter Singer along the path of our argument.

When pro-lifers address the question of personal dignity, we are usually quick to invoke God as the source of it. But at the same time we are keen on finding moral foundations around which a broad consensus can form even in a pluralistic society. And so I propose to see how far I can get without invoking God. After all, believers say that the dignity of persons is intrinsic to persons and is not just extrinsically superimposed on them by God. But if we can recognize human beings as persons without direct recourse to God, and if dignity inheres intrinsically in persons, then we should be able to recognize their dignity as persons without recourse to God. Of course, if we think personal dignity through to the end and trace it back to its ultimate ground, we do arrive at God. Vacav Havel, president of the Czech Republic, recently said: "I always

come to the conclusion that human rights, human freedoms, and human dignity have their deepest roots somewhere outside the perceptible world.

These values are as powerful as they are because...they make sense only in the perspective of the infinite and the eternal.”ⁱⁱⁱ A remarkable statement coming from one who is not a Christian believer! But before we can trace personal dignity to the infinite and the eternal, we must first see what this dignity is in its own right and how it grows out of the person. To this task I limit myself in the present paper.

Another important preliminary remark concerns the way in which I distinguish between personal dignity and the basic rights of the person. Havel uses these concepts interchangeably. Although such usage is common, I propose to distinguish them in two ways. First, the rights of a person have a social dimension that is foreign to dignity. Only *another* person can respect or violate my rights. If I commit suicide, one cannot explain the wrong I undeniably do in terms of me violating my own right to life; it takes a person other than myself to be capable of violating my rights. Just as I cannot steal from my own property or commit adultery with my own wife, so I cannot violate my own right to life. But my dignity as a person is there for me no less than for others; I can act against my own dignity just as much as others can act against it. One might think of self-hatred, or of despair over myself, as examples of offending against my own dignity as person.

Secondly, my basic human rights, as they are called nowadays, are not as strictly inalienable as my personal dignity. I mean that if I ask another to take my life, then, although I act wrongly, I remove my right as a moral obstacle for the other, and the wrong he does has to be explained in terms other than the violation of my right to life. If I tell someone to help himself to my property, I thereby prevent him from being a thief and from violating my property rights—even if I act irresponsibly in offering him my property. In the same way, if I ask someone to take my life, I thereby prevent him from being a murderer—even though I act irresponsibly. Thus I can suspend or block my rights as a morally relevant factor in a given situation. But I cannot remove my dignity from a moral situation in this way. A prostitute may try ever so hard to make herself mere flesh for sale, but despite herself she forever

retains her personal dignity, which is inevitably violated by all her customers. Since, then, my personal dignity is not just there for others but also for me in relation to myself, and since it is absolutely incapable of being suspended or in any way alienated by me, it shows itself to be something different from and deeper than the basic human rights of the person. My concern in this paper is with this dignity rather than with rights.

And one last preliminary. One commonly speaks of depriving a person of dignity by some unworthy or humiliating treatment of that person. But, in fact, unworthy treatment of another is absolutely powerless to abrogate the other's dignity. Dignity is, as I said, intrinsic to being a person, and you would have to first abrogate the other as person before abrogating his or her dignity. Besides, unworthy treatment *presupposes* dignity; a given treatment of another is qualified as unworthy just because it fails to give the other what is due to him or her as a person having dignity. If dignity in my sense were stripped away from a person, then so would be the reason for calling the treatment of that person unworthy. So by dignity I do not mean that treatment of a person which is appropriate to him or her as person, but rather that in a person by virtue of which some treatment is appropriate and other treatment is inappropriate.

2. TWO SOURCES OF THE DIGNITY OF PERSONS

With our preliminaries completed, let us turn to the traditional account of human dignity given by philosophers. The Greeks saw the unique dignity of man in his reason; man is a rational animal and in this he is superior to all subhuman animals. The Greek philosophers saw reason as the divine element in man; for Aristotle, man never lives in a more godlike way than when he exercises his reason in the way of philosophical understanding. Of course, Plato and Aristotle saw reason at work in nature and in the cosmos, but here creatures only passively undergo reason, being ordered according to a rational plan; man by contrast has an essentially more intimate relation to reason in that he understands the meaning of things with his own reason. Reason is internalized in man as it is in no subhuman being, so that he is not just

governed by reason but governs himself with his own reason. (One sees that reason is here understood in such a way as to comprise what we call freedom, even though the Greeks did only partial justice to freedom.) The point for us is that man through his more intimate relation to reason has a greater share in the dignity of reason; since reason enters into his essential definition—man is a rational animal—he surpasses all sub-rational beings in dignity. Here we have a timelessly valid element of the philosophical heritage of the West.

The rationality of man is so rich and deep an idea that one might wonder whether anything more is needed for a full account of the dignity of persons. In explaining the ethics of the respect we owe to each other, in explaining the inviolability that others should recognize in us, do we need to do more than affirm the dignity flowing from the rationality of each human being? I think that we need to do vastly more, and I will now try to explain what this more is.

Notice that rationality is something common to all human beings. It belongs to human nature, the nature in which we all share. Reason is not my exclusive possession, for you too have it. This commonness of reason shows itself in the universal validity of rational activity; whatever I rightly understand as rationally necessary must also be understood by you as rationally necessary. The work of reason is supposed to be impersonal, the same for all, valid for all possible beings endowed with reason. You cannot say that some essential relation is rationally necessary for you but not for me, as if rationality varied from one rational being to the next, each having his own reason. This commonness goes so far that the idea has crept into Western philosophy more than once that human beings are plural only through their bodies, as if the rational spirit in them were literally one, so that each human being does not have his or her own reason in the same way that each has his or her own body. Against this view we have, of course, to say that each human being has his or her own intellect and rational powers, no less than each has his or her own body. And yet, true it is that the rational activities of each converge with those of all other human beings in the sense explained. Individual though reason be in each human being, it is also in some strong sense common to all; and the dignity of rationality is a dignity that

we all share in.

But you will ask, why does this commonness of dignity represent a problem for a philosophy of human dignity? Well, consider this: in a human being there is not only that human nature which he has in common with all other human beings, but also something that he has as his own—his own and not another’s—incommunicably his own. Obviously, a human being would not amount to an individual being if he were not, over and above all that he has in common with others, also incommunicably his own. And so we find that each of us is a certain composition of what we have in common with others and what we precisely do not have in common with others. Now, the dignity of human beings, as we have so far discussed it, is tied to our common human nature, which includes our rational nature. It is not because I am *this incommunicable* human being that I have dignity, but because I am *a human being* endowed with reason. What gives me dignity is not incommunicably my own but is found in every other human being. Some may see no problem for the philosophy of human dignity and may even point out an advantage that seems to be gained by deriving dignity from our common human nature. They will say that the much-celebrated equality of human beings as to dignity is secured by this route, for if that which endows me with dignity also endows you with it, then we are equal in dignity, a conclusion that seems to be of the first importance for the organization of the political community.

And yet there is a problem here if the account of dignity so far proposed is meant as a complete account. Notice that the incommunicable element in man belongs to man *as person*. One of the best known utterances of the Roman jurists about the person connects being a person with being incommunicable: *persona est sui iuris et alteri incommunicabilis*. It is precisely as person that I am myself and no other.

St. Thomas Aquinas clearly teaches that personhood is not a common nature like human nature that can be shared in by many; personhood is rather a matter of being an incommunicable individual within some common nature (see his *Summa theologiae*, I.30.4). This means that the account we have so far given of human dignity does not ground dignity in man as a person; it is not because I am this incommunicable person

that I have dignity, but because I share in the rational nature common to me and many others. This raises the question whether we have yet really taken the full measure of dignity. Is it really true that personhood has nothing to contribute to dignity, that our dignity does not also belong to us in virtue of our being persons?

These doubts grow on us if we consider the difficulty that we have in objecting to certain anti-life measures if we use only the account of dignity so far presented. Let us look at that notorious passage in Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics* that has received so much attention in the press. In defense of a certain case of infanticide he writes as follows:

[S]uppose that a newborn baby is diagnosed as a haemophiliac. The parents, daunted by the prospect of bringing up a child with this condition, are not anxious for him to live. Could euthanasia be defended here? Our first reaction may well be a firm 'no,' for the infant can be expected to have a life that is worth living, even if not quite as good as that of a normal baby.... His life can be expected to contain a positive balance of happiness over misery. To kill him...would be wrong.

Singer proceeds to say that there is a somewhat different utilitarian perspective in which the killing of this infant turns out, after all, to be the right thing to do.

Suppose a woman planning to have two children has one normal child, and then gives birth to a hemophiliac child. The burden of caring for that child may make it impossible for her to cope with a third child; but if the defective child were to die, she would have another.... When the death of a defective infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the defective infant is killed. The loss of happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second. Therefore..., it would...be right to kill him.

Singer concludes this passage with the significant statement that his view "treats infants as replaceable, in much the same way as non-self-conscious animals were treated in Ch. 5."ⁱⁱⁱ

Our question is whether we can take a principled stand against Singer on the basis of the dignity born of our common rational nature. Let us see. Suppose I were to object to him like this: "the hemophiliac

infant has human and hence also rational nature. The infant, having all the dignity that comes from this nature, stands before me as inviolable; no one may directly kill him for the utilitarian reason given by Singer or for any other reason.” Is this a good and decisive response to Singer? Let us suppose, just for the sake of argument, that Singer does not object to ascribing rational nature to an infant that as yet performs no rational activities.

Is Singer left with no response to us? By no means. The statements of his just quoted need not prevent him from professing great admiration for the rational nature of man and saying many of the things that we say about the dignity flowing from it. He is at liberty to say that it would be a terrible crime to destroy the race of rational beings in the world and he might even say that it is wrong needlessly to reduce by even one the number of rational beings in the world. But he will point out that he is not reducing this number; whether one performs or does not perform the infanticide that he advocates, the number of human beings remains the same. Performing the infanticide simply lets Singer get a specimen of health that would otherwise not exist. He will exploit the fact that the dignity of persons depends on their common human nature. He will say that all that is lost when the hemophiliac infant is killed exists again in the healthier infant that he wants to make room for. For this new infant also shares in rational nature and so has dignity from exactly the same source and in exactly the same measure as the hemophiliac infant had it. One instance of rational nature succeeds the other; the first is replaced by the second. The loss in terms of dignity that comes from the infanticide is perfectly and exactly annulled by the gain in terms of dignity that comes from the new child who takes the place of the first child. But, in addition to this “wash” of gain and loss, there is also a gain not annulled by any loss, an absolute gain, namely, the gain of full health in the new child. People like Singer might even make bold to say that we are in fact *required* by our respect for human dignity to carry out this replacement, for we show respect for human dignity by seeing to it that human beings live in the greatest possible state of flourishing. I submit that if we cannot enlarge our account of human dignity, if we cannot find some way to let the incommunicable personhood of each human being play a role in

the grounding of dignity, then we are left with no good answer to Singer.

As long as the dignity of human beings is tied to that which is common to them all, they are replaceable one by another, and Singer has the last word.

Let us then turn our attention to human beings, not insofar as they share in the same nature but insofar as each is himself and no other. If we continue the tradition of using Socrates as a kind of logical dummy, then we can say that we are now turning our attention to Socrates, not as a human being but as Socrates, and we ask whether Socrates does not have some dignity just by being Socrates.

Let us consult those who knew and loved Socrates and ask them whether all that they knew and loved in Socrates could be repeated in some other human being. The human nature of Socrates is in a sense repeated in all other human beings; his being a Greek is in a sense repeated in all other Greeks; his being a philosopher is repeated in all other philosophers; even his famous irony was practiced by at least a few others, by some disciples who have been called “Socratic” thinkers. But those who knew and loved Socrates will not grant that everything that they knew and loved in him can be repeated in others; they will insist, as indeed anyone who loves another person will insist, that there was in Socrates something absolutely unrepeatable; they will say that there was the mystery of the man and that Socrates was not a mere instance or specimen of this mystery but that he *was* it, so that a second Socrates is impossible—strictly, absolutely impossible. When Socrates died, a hole was left in the world, such that no subsequent person could possibly fill it. It was not just that a great philosopher died, the likes of which were not likely to be seen again; with this approach one would push the incommunicable personhood of Socrates into the realm of unusual achievements and miss the mystery of it. The incommunicable Socrates was something ineffable, something too concrete for the general concepts of human language; something knowable through love but not utterable in words.

Let me try to bring out the unrepeatability of which I speak by means of a contrast. Take any copy of today’s *New York Times*. Everything of interest in any one copy can be found as well in any other

copy; no one copy has any point of interest that would distinguish it from the others. In fact, each copy exists simply for the sake of that which is common to all the copies of today's paper; each copy is well made just to the extent that it contains neither more nor less than the other copies contain. Of course, each copy is an incommunicable individual; one copy of the paper is not another. And yet that which is common to all the copies in some sense dominates each individual; the individuals exist simply for the sake of multiplying the common content. This is why any one copy is so easily replaceable by any other copy. If you lose the copy that you first bought, your loss is completely replaced by the purchase of another copy. In fact, the replaceability of one by another goes so far that under certain circumstances the difference between one and another is indiscernible. If I leave a copy of today's *Times* on my desk when I step away, I cannot tell when I return whether it is the same copy or a replacement copy that someone has secretly supplied. What is common to the individual copies is so strong that it may be impossible to tell one individual from another.

Clearly it is along just these lines that Singer is thinking when he proposes replacing one human infant with another. Killing the hemophilic infant so as to make room for a perfectly healthy one is just like turning in a frayed copy of today's *Times* for a perfectly clean one. Even if that which is common to many individuals is not just the content of today's news but is the much grander thing of human nature with its wonder of rationality, the human individuals who are being treated as mere instances in relation to the common will still be subject to the same law of replaceability that we see with the newspapers.

What I have tried to show of Socrates, who here stands for every human person, is that there is something in him that can be known and loved that is not a mere instance of some kind, that is not common to him and others, that is incommunicably his own, that is too concrete and individual to be common to him and others. No hole is left in the world by the destruction of a copy of today's paper as long as other copies remain; but an irreparable, unfillable hole is left by the removal of a single human person. Not even God can fill it; it is not that He lacks power, but absurd things do not fall within the scope of His power, and

completely replaceable persons, or persons who exist in duplicate or triplicate, are as great a metaphysical absurdity as there is.

And so we have developed the distinction between that which is incommunicably each person's own and that which is common to many persons. Before proceeding further, I should remind my readers that this is only a distinction and that in an integral personalist philosophy one would have to re-unite the things distinguished. This means that one would have to show that the very idea of a "mere specimen of rational nature" is absurd, that rational nature cannot be multiplied in interchangeable individuals in the way that today's newspaper can be multiplied, and that rational nature is such that it can exist only in incommunicable persons. This would, in turn, mean that the Greek idea of "man as rational being" already contains "man as person," and that the Christian idea of "man as person" does not overthrow but only serves to complete the Greek idea of "man as rational being." But I will not try to give a full account of this unity of the human person; the contribution that I want to make here to our understanding of the dignity of man requires above all that I focus attention on "man as incommunicable person."

Now, the dignity of a human being is grounded, or rather co-grounded, in this incommunicable personhood of each. It is not only because I share in the rational nature common to us all that I have dignity, but also because I am the unrepeatable person that I am. This unrepeatable person has value, for it awakens love when glimpsed by others. But it is not a value achieved only by some and not by others, for it goes with existing as a person. It is that aspect of dignity that we can with all precision call the dignity of the human person. And only when our understanding of the sources of dignity has been expanded to encompass the incommunicable personhood of each human being are we in a position to defend hemophiliac infants against the likes of Peter Singer. For now, but only now, can we say that this infant has dignity, not just as the bearer of rational human nature, but as this infant, as this incommunicable newborn person. The hemophiliac infant cannot be replaced because, as person, it is absolutely unreplaceable and is invested with dignity in its very unreplaceability. Only now does human dignity

bring with it moral protection for the individual person. Only now can the invocation of dignity do the work in moral analysis that we expect it to do.

Those contemporary philosophers who, in speaking of personal dignity, stress the *otherness* of other human beings (for example, Levinas) are finding dignity precisely in the personal incommunicability to which I have been calling attention. They form a certain contrast to those who speak of the other as *alter ego*, who are approaching others in terms of what is common to themselves and the others; the advocates of radical otherness are approaching others in terms of what each person incommunicably is.

We may come to understand better this personal dignity and the inviolability of the individual person that follows from it if we see the “intimation of immortality” that it contains for individual persons. Let us assume that human beings really were mere instances of human nature. In that case an endless succession of human beings would provide all the immortality that anyone could wish. Their ability to replace each other would allow for an immortality accomplished through mortal individuals continually reproducing themselves. The immortality of man need not bring with it the immortality of any individual human being. But since human persons are precisely not mere instances of human nature and since the final destruction of any one of them would tear open a hole in being that could never be filled, there is a deep point to the immortality of individual persons. This is, of course, not a finished proof but only, as I put it, an “intimation of immortality” for persons. But it does add something to our understanding of personal dignity. The inviolability of persons known to us from our moral dealings with them becomes a promise of immortality when persons are considered in relation to death.

3. SOME OBJECTIONS

When in the past I have presented to other philosophers something like this account of personal dignity, I have received various objections.

According to the first, my view exaggerates the importance of that which is incommunicably each person’s own. One says that what distinguishes one person from another is really peripheral to the person.

Put together some things like the place of one's upbringing, the year of one's birth, one's IQ, and soon you will have a set of properties that serves to distinguish one person from all others. But these individuating factors are not central to a person; what is central to him is his having a soul, having free will, being made for God, and the like. These central determinants of a person are common to him and all other persons, whereas the determinants of him being himself and no other are, as was said, relatively peripheral. But that which is relatively peripheral to a person can certainly play no very large role in establishing the dignity of the person; if dignity is to depend on what belongs most centrally to a person, it will have to depend on what is common to him and all persons. Hence, the attempt to bring incommunicable personhood into the ground of human dignity is misguided.

I respond by saying that the objection quite trivializes what I mean by personal incommunicability. I do not mean merely a bundle of traits in a being, as if the whole bundle served to identify this being as this one and no other, even though each separate trait were common to that being and to many other beings. Such a bundle just provides a device for picking out one individual among other individuals and referring to it with precision; it does not capture that ineffable mystery of a person that engenders love in the one who know the person. Besides, many a bundle of traits that happens to pick out one individual could in principle be instantiated by more than one individual; however unlikely it is to be repeated in others, this could in principle happen, and hence the bundle falls short of the unrepeatable person.^{iv} It follows from my discussion in this paper that the whole conception of personal incommunicability as peripheral is fundamentally flawed; it is simply not true that the deeper we go into the center of a person, the more we find that which is common to all persons. Just the contrary is true: we arrive at the center of a person only when we encounter the person as unrepeatable.^v It is, then, quite in order to let personal incommunicability play a large role in our account of human dignity.

According to a second objection, my view seems to compromise the unity of the human species. One suspects that I am saying of human persons what St. Thomas Aquinas said of the angels, namely, that each is

its own species, and thus that human persons are not together in the unity of one human species. And there are indeed weighty reasons, including weighty theological reasons, for wanting to preserve the unity of the human species. I would say in response that the unrepeatability of human persons as I understand it does not prevent them from sharing a common nature. From the beginning to the end of this paper I have acknowledged this common nature. We can in fact express the unrepeatability of persons in terms which *presuppose* a common nature, as when I say that each human person has human nature in his or her incommunicable, unrepeatable way. This “adverbial” way of expressing personal incommunicability inserts it from the beginning within our common human nature.

More interesting, in my opinion, is a third objection, according to which the equality of persons seems to be jeopardized by letting dignity be based in part on persons as incommunicable. As we remarked above, we seem to secure this equality by letting dignity flow from our common human nature, for then dignity arises in each person from the same source. But if we let it also flow from the unrepeatable personhood of each human being, then this dignity is no longer the same in each person but is one thing in one person and another thing in another. This might seem to open the door to persons differing in dignity, some having more of it and some having less. In this case the appeal to personal dignity could function in moral discussions in certain “elitist” ways that would yield some very suspicious moral conclusions.

To this objection I would first respond that the equality of human dignity is by no means secured by deriving dignity from our common rational nature. For one could say with Aristotle that man realizes this rational nature more perfectly than woman, that masters realize it more perfectly than natural slaves, that Greeks realize it more perfectly than barbarians, and one could thus be led to posit large differences in dignity among human beings. The equality of dignity is better preserved by letting dignity also derive from personal unrepeatability. For you cannot say that one incommunicable person has more dignity and another has less without positing some common dignity-grounding quality possessed to different degrees by the two persons; but with such a common quality

you abandon the incommunicability of persons who are being compared.

The fact is that, by being incommunicable and unrepeatable, persons are incommensurable with each other and cannot be compared with each other, and with this a certain equality is established among them. They are alike in that each is incommunicable and unrepeatable. In addition, the comparisons that give rise to more or less dignity are blocked by the incommensurability of persons with each other. We have seen in this paper that dignity belongs to persons *both* because of their sameness in a common nature *and* because of their differences one from another. As for the equality of personal dignity, we get the surprising result that the differences among unrepeatable persons lend more support to this equality than the sameness does.

NOTES

i. I did address this question in my 1993 UFL paper: "The Personhood of the Embryo" in *Life and Learning III: Proceedings of the Third University Faculty for Life Conference*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: UFL, 1993), pp. 177-99.

ii. Vacav Havel, "Kosovo and the End of the Nation-State," *The New York Review of Books* (June 10, 1999), p. 6.

iii. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 133-34.

iv. For a penetrating criticism of this bundle theory of personal incommunicability, see Jorge Gracia, *Individuality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), *e.g.*, pp. 64-69, to mention just one passage.

v. Max Scheler argues for just this thesis and in fact regards it as a thesis central to his ethical personalism; see the discussion of this whole theme in Scheler's thought in my "The Individuality of Human Persons: A Study in the Ethical Personalism of Max Scheler," *The Review of Metaphysics* 52/1 (1998) 21-50.