

Knowledge, Glory and 'On Human Dignity'

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The idea of dignity seems inseparable from that of humanity, whether in its universal dimension of 'human dignity', or in the individual 'dignity of the person'. We do not (yet?) speak of animal dignity, nor of the dignity of nature, even though some are tempted to invoke – erroneously – rights for animals or rights of nature. In truth these notions of dignity, humanity and individuality all reflect back onto one another whenever we try to define them. What is more, such attempts at definition often come up against almost insurmountable linguistic obstacles when they seek to lay down so-called 'values' or a universal ethic.

In order to overcome such difficulties, which are inherent in all inter-cultural dialogue where the differences and linguistic idiosyncrasies that characterize them are taken into account, it is better to proceed 'from bottom up', starting out from case-by-case analyses of situations where these notions come into play, rather than following a 'top down' approach starting out from abstract definitions, which are necessarily influenced by the languages and cultural traditions in which they are expressed.

The ethics governing the sciences and technology, in particular the biological sciences and biotechnology, provide especial examples of concrete situations where such case analyses can be made.

Some observers, drawn into excessive generalization, perceive the danger of a post-human environment emerging, ushered in by the constantly accelerated pace of technological development that occurred throughout the 20th century and its consequent effect on the human condition through the social, cultural and moral repercussions of more or less catastrophic degree which seem inevitably to accompany them.

Granted, the present-day explosion of knowledge and technical invention and its unbridled exploitation, fuelled by the sole imperative of the market, keeps on throwing up new problems in relation to future dangers that it gives a glimpse of. But these dangers are those of a rise in inhumanity, rather than of the so-called 'disappearance of man', or of his being replaced by some form of post-humanity.

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Let us immediately recognize that inhumanity has been for all time the characteristic of the human species. In fact, only human beings can be inhuman or experience the inhuman. Mineral, vegetal and animal existence can only ever be assigned to the non-human. And it is precisely because science and technology are among the most characteristic spheres of human activity that the everlasting question arises of whether their products are human or inhuman.¹

Ever since man mastered fire and invented the wheel, science and technological invention have always exercised both fascination and dread, for these have served simply to increase man's power over nature and over his own condition, including his tendency towards inhumanity. The traditional expressions of humanism and the 'values' that they have encapsulated have not managed to prevent sudden outbreaks of inhuman behaviour on a wide scale. Such values have even been invoked in order to justify these. One can think of the massacres of native peoples, forced conversions and other excesses of colonization, together with the millions of victims sacrificed to ideologies, both secular and religious, at the altar of human salvation by any means, whether they wished it or not. We are still not immune to inhumanity of this type, which is always associated with totalitarian ideologies, even if, like the road to hell, they are paved with the best of intentions. Our only practical option for diminishing the probability that these excesses will continue to spread is to hold fast to democracy as a form of government and to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a barrier against the practice of inhumanity, independently, to a certain degree, of any theoretical adhesion to any particular idea of man or nature.

In fact, the danger of inhumanity is consubstantial with humanity and the human species itself. The English language has a wider range than French for labelling the human characteristic whose opposite is the inhuman; it distinguishes the *humane* from the simply *human*, whose opposite is not the inhuman but simply the non-human, the non-belonging to the species. Thus humaneness, of which inhumanity is indeed the opposite, along with the notion of dignity with which it is closely associated, is not reducible simply to its biological components. It is, to be sure, the result of biological evolution, but also of cultural evolution whose mechanisms are not the same and which does not necessarily obey the same laws. It is perhaps by reflecting on this notion of human dignity that one can delineate what is understood by this humane dimension of man which is subject to threat. But the notion of dignity remains obscure, even though omnipresent in discourse as a criterion of ethical demarcation; it leads us to rate certain practices as non-acceptable, like reproductive human cloning for example, or experimentation on human subjects without consent, or other treatments considered inhuman such as torture or slavery; these we disqualify on moral grounds as being contrary to essential human dignity.

Therein would appear to lurk a vicious circle arising out of an essential tautology: inhumanity being defined as an offence against human dignity, and offence against human dignity being defined as inhumanity.

But this is in fact not the case, and to help understand this, a little detour via analyses of the just as obscure but related notions of honour and 'glory'² may assist.

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Let us recall first of all that the notion of 'glory', both human and divine, infuses many texts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, one of the pivotal eras, precisely, which ushered in the scientific revolution in Europe. In the writings of Pico della Mirandola, for example, 'glory' is explicitly associated with dignity, to which he devoted the whole of a small treatise, as an introduction to his 'Nine Hundred Theses', a vast compendium 'on the sublime mysteries of Christian theology, on the loftiest questions of philosophy, on unknown teachings'.³ Dignity and glory indeed belong to the creatures who dwell 'beyond the chambers of the world [in] the chamber nearest the most lofty divinity. There, as the sacred mysteries reveal, the seraphim, cherubim and thrones occupy the first places.' But the human condition, itself higher than that of all other creatures, leads us to 'compete with the angels in dignity and glory'.⁴ Even more, by this effort, the dignity of man, to whom is given freedom as a doorway to the possible and a capacity of self-realization, elevates him above the angels and allows the world to reach its perfection. Our dignity is thus no different from the glory of God: 'aroused with ineffable charity as with fire, placed outside of ourselves like burning Seraphim, filled with divinity, we shall not now be ourselves but He himself who made us'.⁵

We do not have to limit ourselves to this theological and mystical vocabulary, which can seem rather old-fashioned today. But we can pick up this terminology and bring it down to earth, so to speak, by stripping it of its mystic haloes. Depending on context, these notions of reputation (*gloire*), honour and dignity are interchangeable. And as we have seen, such notions are today difficult to define, even though they play an essential part in the definition of particular moral and juridical norms. To take an example, Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that 'all human beings are born equal in rights and dignity'. The notion of equality sometimes serves to provide a substance, at least on the political level, to that of dignity, therein constituting one of the foundations of democracy. The notion of dignity is also present in considerations of biomedical ethics as a value that must be respected in all circumstances. And the very concept of a crime against humanity implicitly contains, as its inverse, the right to this 'indefinable human dignity.' It is this which, according to Mireille Delmas-Marty, would provide the definition of a 'humanity' which goes beyond mere belonging to the species, the humanity which is destroyed by crimes against humanity.⁶ But in reverse, a definition of this form of humanity, in a moral and social sense, the opposite of which is the inhuman rather than the non-human, allows in turn the notion of dignity to be defined. We thus arrive at a circular, but not tautological, definition where the 'not inhuman' is defined by dignity and dignity by the 'not inhuman'. We also find in Spinoza a moral definition of *Humanitas* in that particular sense, where what 'is habitually called *humanitas*' consists in that 'we also endeavour to do whatever we imagine men to regard with pleasure, and on the other hand we shun doing whatever we imagine men to regard with aversion'.⁷ We find in this a form of the classic and supposedly universal 'golden rule' of not doing to others what one would hate having done to oneself, but *modulated here by the role of the imagination*. For indeed nothing proves to us that others have the same desires and aversions as we. We are left with having to imagine this, which markedly reduces the altruism of the rule. It is only in a society where all live within the realm

of reason that the reciprocity of the rule can truly function, since all would have the same aversions, if not the same desires.

But we perceive also, in this comment on humanity in the form of affect or feeling, an echo of one of the definitions of 'glory' which Spinoza gives elsewhere in relation to its association with the praise of others: 'Honour [*gloria*] is pleasure accompanied by the idea of some action of ours which we think that others praise'.⁸ This definition reveals the ambivalent character of this human sense of 'gloria' (*gloire*), something not particularly 'glorious' in effect when it comes down to this type of reputation derived from public praise. Spinoza gives emphasis to this ambivalence in the context of what he calls *humanitas*, when it relates to 'this *conatus* [effort] to do, and also to avoid doing, something simply in order to please men'.⁹ This, he says, is then called 'Ambition'. We are here very far from the lofty heights of the intellectual love of God and of human liberty. But these forms of humanity and dignity that are reflected in each other describe in effect a minimum degree of these qualities, attainable by all through the imagination. This Spinozian 'first type of knowledge' – by imagination – however confused, distorted and occasionally illusory it might be, is effectively granted to all human beings. Contrary to what might be said, the imaginative consciousness, based to a greater or lesser extent on illusion, is probably more equally distributed within the human species than is reason. By retaining therefore the function of the imagination in this definition of 'glory', we may define human dignity as '*the minimum quantum of recognition (gloire) without which an individual would be excluded from human society; that is, following these definitions, a minimum level of self-esteem and satisfaction, as well as of recognition and acknowledgement by others, in the absence of which the condition of a human being would be inhuman*'.

But 'Glory' is also the name that, for Spinoza, the Bible 'not without reason' gives to Beatitude, or Spinozan liberty, the highest perfection that the philosopher is thought to attain through the trained exercise of his understanding.¹⁰ Taking into account Spinoza's close awareness of the Hebrew Bible, this sends us to the Hebrew word *kavod*, meaning glory, honour or dignity, which shares the same root as *kaved*, meaning 'heavy'. We are thus led to consider *kavod* as a weight, ontological and moral in nature, such that possessing this dignity is what gives a human being an irreducible 'weight', in other words, that he or she possesses an intrinsic value in itself. This is the minimum 'weight' accorded to a human existence, without which it would become inhuman.

This interpretation can be linked to the formal sense of 'power' of a number accorded in earlier times to the notion of dignity in mathematics: the *n*th 'dignity of a number' specified, in Leibniz for example, *n* 'continual multiplications' of this number by itself.¹¹

It is worth noting that this link between dignity and humanity is not tautological in that it is not the case of simple identity. This can be seen in respect of actions and behaviours. An inhuman action consists of removing or denying the essential dignity of a human being. But an action that falls short of the standards of human dignity (*une action indigne*) is not necessarily inhuman. Such behaviours or actions are unworthy (*indignes*) or dishonouring for the perpetrator himself to the extent that they diminish others' appreciation or recognition of him. This is what is associated

with quasi-universal experiences of the absence of dignity such as those of shame and also, indirectly, of humiliation.

It is there that the two senses of the human and the humane can come together, as should be expected, out of a truly monist conception of body and mind as two different aspects of the same thing. One cannot set aside the human body in any definition of human dignity. There nevertheless remains hanging the question of ontogenesis and first beginnings, the question of where the limit is drawn: from what moment does a body become a human body? That is clearly the question underlying the debates on the nature and status of the human embryo. This question is posed against the background of the unity of nature and of the gradualism observable in the continuity of development as in that of the evolution of species. In such a context, a response to the question asking at what point does the existence of the human body commence cannot be founded upon an illusory essentialist definition, in the sense of an abstract essence of man which would be infused in him once and for all, whether through the genetic heritage – at the moment of conception as marking the constitution of the genome – or through a more or less arbitrary appreciation of certain degrees of consciousness appearing over the course of development or evolution. There remains the possibility of a definition based on emergence, whereby the humanness of the human being becomes established in progression with the formation of his/her body. The threshold beyond which this body starts to be human is therefore that at which *its human form can be recognised*, including most obviously the face, the 'glorious' form above all. This would correspond to an ancient Aristotelian definition, incorporated into Jewish and Muslim tradition as well as having apparently been adopted by Christian tradition in its Thomist form, which followed the thesis of 'late animation' before this was superseded by the doctrine of 'early animation' which is the current Catholic orthodoxy.

Whatever might be the judgements that are brought to these questions, and, as a consequence of these, whatever pragmatic decisions might be taken relating to non-crossable thresholds and barriers when we are confronted by concrete situations, it may be seen that the issue is not that of human nature being under threat per se, but that of the emergence of new forms of inhumanity, in the awareness that the danger of inhumanity is consubstantial with the human dimension itself of the human species.

This humanity of *Homo sapiens* is still persistently in danger as it always was in the past, and each advance in the progress of knowledge brings new dangers. For knowledge is intrinsically ambivalent, at once both good and harmful, for it disturbs the order of things, it opens up new possibilities out of old certitudes. Like all creative activity, it is both destructive and constructive. And when it is accompanied by an increase in mastery over nature, its ambivalence is multiplied by that of nature itself. For nature is not solely good, as certain naive ecologists seem to believe. It is at once beneficent and harmful, a source of both prosperity and suffering, as is every transformation that is imposed upon it.

Yet we cannot halt the march towards knowledge. The wish to know is itself also consubstantial with the whole human condition. And the lucidity brought by what rigorous and disinterested research teaches us is itself constitutive of what creates human dignity.

In conclusion, we should not dread false fears or pursue mistaken targets. The danger lies not in the disappearance of the humanity of man but in the appearance of new forms of inhumanity, following on from the inhumanity of ages past. Drawing lessons from past experience, we will do well to recall that inhumanity has always prospered from the illusions about discoveries which were thought to be definitive or final, heralding the dawn of a new age or of a long-anticipated salvation. Far better to retain that uncertainty of not knowing which we keep on discovering even as new knowledge appears.

For narrow is the way between rigid adherence to immutable beliefs and the intoxication of new discovery which always lurks behind the arrogance and illusion of omnipotence.

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. See Henri Atlan (2002).
2. Translator's note: The French use of the term 'gloire' in this article poses certain difficulties of translation. 'Gloire' in French conveys more particularly the meanings of 'high renown, honour, noble reputation, fame', that is, a great admiration and respect bestowed by others, and only secondarily that of 'prestigious splendour and majesty' especially when referring to the 'glory of God' (see Le Robert Dictionnaire du français where this second meaning is listed as 'dated or literary'). The article makes use of both of these meanings, but other than in the section discussing the notion of human dignity in Pico della Mirandola, the sense of 'gloire' as 'high esteem or reputation' tends to predominate.
While the range of meanings of 'glory' in English generally parallels those of 'gloire' in French, the weighting of the English meanings appears to be the reverse of French. Though the sense 'exalted praise, honour, or admiration accorded by common consent to a person or thing; honourable fame, renown' is the first one given by the Oxford English Dictionary, modern usage does not use 'glory' in the sense of 'reputation' except in limited circumstances ('he won glory on the battlefield'). The predominant use tends to be that of 'resplendent beauty, magnificence, an exalted or prosperous state', whether applied to the divine or to high human institutions.
In consequence, where a choice of a term other than 'glory' (sic) has been selected for the translation, the French original (gloire) is appended in brackets.
3. G. Pico della Mirandola (1965: 19).
4. G. Pico della Mirandola (1965: 7).
5. G. Pico della Mirandola (1965: 14).
6. Henri Atlan et al. (1999: 81–2; 99–109).
7. Spinoza, *The Ethics* Part III, Proposition 29 (1982: 121).
8. Ibid., 'Definition of the Emotions', XXX, p. 148. [Translator's note: the English translation consulted renders Spinoza's Latin 'gloria' here as 'honour' whereas the French translation quoted by the author retains 'la Gloire'.]
9. Ibid., Proposition 29 'Scholium', p. 122.
10. See Henri Atlan (2003: 132ff).
11. G.W. Leibniz (1991: 41).

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