

Book Reviews

Colin Bird: *Human Dignity and Political Criticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xiii, 266.)

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Human dignity is a concept with broad resonance in a range of social movements. In the last few decades, several political and legal theorists have sought to give content to the idea of human dignity and to explain how this idea relates to human rights, justice, and equality. Colin Bird's *Human Dignity and Political Criticism* offers a fresh, insightful, and provocative approach to the topic of human dignity and its place in political philosophy.

Bird begins by observing that a set of philosophical commitments he calls “dignitarian humanism” have widespread appeal today. Generally speaking, “dignitarian humanism” refers to the view that human beings have inherent dignity or “worth” that entitles them to be treated with respect and furnishes a moral benchmark against which political arrangements can be judged. Bird's goal is to critique dignitarian humanism, but not to reject it entirely; he seeks to highlight both its limitations and its promise.

More specifically, Bird argues against “traditional” accounts of human dignity and in favor of a “revisionist” approach. According to traditional accounts, human dignity is a form of intrinsic worth that all persons possess equally, regardless of how they are treated or behave, and that requires others to extend unconditional respect. Bird proposes an approach that is “revisionist” in the sense of “drop[ping] any presumption that human dignity is a preset value standing apart from the transactions and routines of everyday life” (113).

Human dignity from the revisionist perspective “is a transient, vulnerable, and socially extended quality whose emergence depends on the character of concrete, organized, interaction under actually existing regimes” (113). Human dignity for the revisionist is a characteristic of social relations present when people are in fact treated with respect, which involves a commitment to valuing human beings for their own sake. Unlike on the traditional account, social subjugation and degradation can deform or even destroy human dignity. The revisionist view does not mean, Bird emphasizes, that people stripped of social respect thereby come to lack moral worth or to deserve mistreatment. The point is simply that human dignity—which for Bird is distinct from inherent moral worth—reveals itself only when people respond to one another with respect.

Bird's revisionist account of human dignity raises the question: Why does it matter how human dignity is conceptualized? If traditionalists and revisionists agree that human beings should be treated with respect, then what difference does it make whether the term "human dignity" is used to refer to an inner worth that grounds a claim to respectful treatment, or to a quality of social relations that deteriorates when respectful treatment is withheld? One might argue that the question whether people can "lose" their human dignity is semantic: if "human dignity" refers to inherent worth, the answer is no, and if "human dignity" refers to a product of respectful social relations, the answer is yes.

Bird's book contains many thought-provoking explanations of the stakes of the choice between traditionalism and revisionism. The following points seem most central. First, Bird aims for dignity to provide a basis for critical reflection on politics (hence the title of the book, *Human Dignity and Political Criticism*). The revisionist account appears designed to draw attention to real-world experiences of human dignity and its absence. In that way, political philosophers can use the idea of dignity to judge certain political arrangements to be more desirable from a dignitarian point of view. Second, revisionism underscores the deep connection between social arrangements and individual lives. Some would insist that people retain their dignity no matter how badly they are treated; but revisionism stresses the ways in which social circumstances can "leave human lives forsaken" (238). Third, dignity revisionism, in treating human dignity as vulnerable and fragile, renders it all the more urgent that society be structured to preserve human dignity rather than to destroy it. Overall, Bird's revisionist approach treats human dignity as an actual feature of social life and the power relations within it, rather than as an ethereal quality that may not usefully guide political criticism.

Human Dignity and Political Criticism is a valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on dignity in political philosophy. Bird excavates the concept of human dignity from a variety of historical and theoretical perspectives, delving deeply into the theories of such thinkers as Marx and Hayek. The book demonstrates the benefits that redound from treating "human dignity" not as equivalent or reducible to other concepts, such as "moral value" or "equal status." Instead, Bird deftly situates human dignity in a rich and humanistic philosophical context.

Bird's account of human dignity leaves open certain questions about how this concept ought to be defined and deployed. His emphasis on the social contingency of dignity is at odds with stoical views, according to which external influences cannot erase people's inner dignity. There may be good reasons to underscore the need for social conditions that support rather than tear down dignity (as earlier noted). But stoical views may direct attention to the nobility of resilience—not only in the form of dramatic courageous acts, but also in the form of a resolution to live day by day, in community with others, in the face of efforts to degrade and diminish. Bird's account certainly

does not entail rejection of such resilience as a virtue, but it is not entirely clear how the revisionist vision of human dignity accounts for it.

Perhaps most significantly, the question remains how the concept of human dignity can adjudicate political disputes about which social circumstances are beneficial or harmful. Bird notes that his account is not designed to answer “exactly. . . what an adamant commitment to protecting human dignity requires of a political community” (250). He provides some examples of how dignity revisionism could guide practical political inquiry. For instance, the revisionist account suggests that redistributive taxation is not on a par with forced labor, as those taxed are not “forsaken” by society or stripped of social value (251). Yet socially divisive arguments remain: Does legalized abortion promote or undermine human dignity? What about religious exemptions from antidiscrimination laws? Or affirmative action? To be sure, human dignity might not be able to do all the work in resolving these controversies. But it would be instructive to have a sense of how, if at all, an account of human dignity could help us make complex political judgments in a diverse society.

In sum, *Human Dignity and Political Criticism* contributes to politically attuned philosophical reflection by offering a penetrating and astute look at human dignity.

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Bonnie Honig: *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 208.)

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To think with Bonnie Honig is, to borrow an image from Walter Benjamin, to think in constellations. Based on Honig’s 2017 Mary Flexner Lectures at Bryn Mawr College, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* is an account of democratic citizenship enjoining feminists to embrace “a normative, civic, and feminist obligation to risk the impurities of politics on behalf of transformation” (1). Honig evaluates “three refusal concepts in the contemporary refusal literature: inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation” (xiii). These concepts emerge respectively from the work of Giorgio Agamben, Adriana Cavarero, and Saidiya Hartman—though Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Hannah Arendt, Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener,” the life of Muhammad Ali, and the 2015 film *The Fits* form additional sites of reflection. Theorizing refusal as a tripartite arc, not an act, Honig explores refusal through Euripides’s