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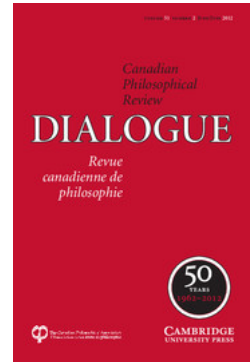
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Human Dignity

GEORGE KATEB

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Humanity's place in the world is a significant matter, both from an existential and a practical viewpoint. George Kateb's *Human Dignity* deals with, *inter alia*, moral philosophy, philosophical anthropology (establishing the basis for human dignity) and philosophy of law (addressing the subject of human rights). Despite the scope of the inquiry, the author has managed to present his ideas in a book of modest proportions.

Many works that deal with topics such as these excel in producing opaque arguments, larded with language of the same nature. Fortunately, Kateb is a positive exception in this regard. Not only does he steer clear of such a *modus operandi*, he also explicates matters in instances in which this is desirable. This, together with the author's accessible style, makes the difficulties readily apparent. That such exist at all is, of course, unwelcome, but this state of affairs is still preferable to one—not seldom found in present-day philosophy—in which the reader is forced to find his way through a web of intricacies spun by the author in an attempt to hide the weaknesses in his theory. Kateb can, in any event, not be accused of such a course of action. He seeks to locate the foundation of human dignity and to know which consequences follow from it.

The outline of *Human Dignity* is presented thus:

I wish to go to the extent of saying that the human species is indeed something special, that it possesses valuable, commendable uniqueness or distinctiveness that is unlike the uniqueness of any other species. It has higher dignity than all other species, or a qualitatively different dignity from all of them. The higher dignity is theoretically founded on humanity's partial discontinuity with nature. Humanity is not only natural, whereas all other species are only natural. The reasons for this assertion, however, have nothing to do with theology or religion.

I therefore work with the assumption that we can distinguish between the dignity of every human individual and the dignity of the human species as a whole. With that assumption in place, I make another assumption, that the dignity of every individual is equal to that of every other; which is to say that every human being has a *status* equal to that of all others. [...] All individuals are equal; no other species is equal to humanity. These are the two basic propositions that make up the concept of human dignity. The idea that humanity is special comes into play when species are compared to one another from an external and deindividualized (though of course only human) point of view. When we refer to the dignity of the human species, we could speak of the *stature* of the human race as distinguished from the *status* of individuals (pp. 5, 6).

Kateb's notion of "human dignity" is an intricate one, incorporating status and stature (as just mentioned) (p. 9; cf. p. 18). One wonders, though, what could prompt such an amalgam. If there were merely a need to underline the special contributions individuals (are able to) accomplish, the stature aspect would obviously be a superfluous addition. The benefit—if that is what this is—of such a conception is, in any event, that it includes those who cannot claim any merit; for them the stature aspect is the crucial element. A clear downside of this element is its vagueness, which may be precisely what accounts for its success to accommodate those that lack a status in the sense in which it is usually understood (the status of one human being *not* being equal to that of all others, in contradistinction to what is the case in the author's conception).

The difficulties are brought to the fore by Kateb's insistence to consider uniqueness to be "[...] the element common to status and stature [...]" (p. 8). This becomes apparent when it is somewhat concretized: "[...] the dignity of the human species lies in its uniqueness in a world of species. I am what no one else is, while not existentially superior to anyone else; we human beings belong to a species that is what no other species is; it is the highest species on earth—so far" (p. 17). Still, if Kateb is, as would appear to be the case, not willing to single out one or more actual criteria on the basis of which the human species's dignity would subsequently be defended, it is simply the bare fact of belonging to this species that is decisive, namely (presumably) having certain *physical* characteristics, making the decisive element an arbitrary one. Once the author reaches the point where he starts to list the characteristics that are unique to human beings, it is clear that he dismisses such a way out (and rightly so, for the reason just mentioned), but he does not provide another solution: "All the traits and attributes are based in the body, but none is reducible to a merely biological phenomenon with an exclusively biological explanation" (p. 133). The distinction between animals and

human beings, at least in the way the author presents it, easily leads to the (rightful) accusation of speciesism. (Kateb denies that the accusation of speciesism (referring to it as “species snobbery”) applies to his position (p. 179), but I have found no basis in his work that would substantiate this statement.)

It is not reason (in whatever sense) that is crucial, as this would exclude those who are seriously cognitively impaired, and would easily force a modification of this outlook, either conferring dignity on those animals that exhibit more intelligence than these individuals, or denying these individuals dignity. Neither of these options is open to Kateb, which makes the vagueness of his definitions all the more problematic. (Incidentally, it is a *non sequitur* to conclude from the mere fact that the human species is unique that it should *eo ipso* be “elevated” in some way compared to the other species.)

It is almost as if the theory were constructed with the agenda in mind to create a “safe haven” for every human being, while being able to justify a different treatment for animals, whose suffering, not belonging to a species that is unique, is less important than that of humankind. (pp. 22, 23) (Kateb does not ignore animals’ suffering, though, and speaks of animal rights as “[...] made up of two components: the quasi-moral and the quasi-existential, in analogy with human rights” (p. 117)). The protective stance towards human beings becomes apparent, e.g., when Kateb says, committing an *argumentum ad consequentiam*: “[...] [W]e should not speak as if at any time degraded human beings are no longer human; to do so would justify the treatment inflicted on them” (p. 21).

On the basis of the foregoing, it appears difficult, if not downright impossible, to delineate a domain to which human beings exclusively belong on account of a non-trivial trait. This may be called a lower limit when it comes to seeking a contrast with those species that (supposedly) lack (this sort of) dignity. The upper limit, by contrast, lies in the acknowledgement of the non-existence of a special standing for those human beings that are endowed with extraordinary qualities, although the author does not overlook the differences between individual human beings. Still, he seems to need precisely the achievements of such individuals to buttress the special position of mankind, pointing to “[...] the great achievements that testify to human stature because [...] they rebut the contention that human beings are merely another species in nature, and thus prepare the way for us to regard every person in his or her potentiality” (p. 8; cf. p. 115).

“Great achievements” would in fact plead *inequality* among human beings (since the achievements of some exceed those of others). The uniqueness of the species can, accordingly, only be said to follow from the achievements of great individuals (or at least not from the acts of each individual); in the most extreme cases (people that are significantly cognitively impaired), individuals are not even *capable of* performing unique accomplishments. It must be granted that the great achievements are connected to human *stature* (p. 179) rather than to the status of individuals, so that individuals may be said to “share” in the achievements: they are of the same species as the “great” individuals and might be considered, from this perspective, to achieve great things if the circumstances had been different, whereas an animal would (presumably) never be able to, e.g., compose music or prove a theorem. If this reasoning is carried through consistently, those individuals who are unable to contribute in such a way should not be considered human beings (or even individuals).

The alternative consists in including such beings, at the expense of the disappearance of the demarcation line (the lower limit just mentioned) between human beings and

animals. This is not what Kateb would argue, focusing on the fact of being human: "There are people who are so disabled that they cannot function. Does the idea of dignity apply to them? Yes, they remain human beings in the most important respect. If they cannot actively exercise many or any of their rights they nevertheless retain a right to life, whatever their incapacities (short of the most extreme failures of functioning)" (p. 19).

It is not surprising that Kateb finds himself in a split (or dilemma). He—rightly—denies that the whole human record is personified in every individual, but states that, on the basis of the stature aspect, each one has all the human characteristics (pp. 125, 126; cf. p. 179). On the one hand, individuals are not the personification of the human record (so that the individuals whose mental capacities are exceeded by those of some animals are included—at the same time, a supposedly common ground (the very human record) between "great" individuals and these individuals is lost), but on the other hand, every individual has all the decisive traits and attributes to include him (which is easily refuted on the basis of experience). This theory may be said to want too much, so to speak: it is not prepared to sacrifice what is special in humanity but fails to accept the consequences of this premise when it is pressed to do so, thus leaving an account that may be considered inconsistent or even void.

What does all this mean for the issue of granting rights? Kateb says: "Two kinds of equality are involved when the state recognizes and respects human rights. First, there is moral equality, and second, there is the equal status of every individual" (p. 30). The first sort of equality is difficult to maintain in the light of the foregoing analysis. The second sort of equality, the equal status of every individual, can be defended, but in order to eliminate the difficulties pointed out above, another foundation—or, rather, *a* foundation—must be provided.

The problem with "human dignity," it seems, is that it is an honorific rather than a description, so that the reason *why* dignity should be bestowed on human beings remains to be clarified. One may contrast this with an honorific bestowed on, e.g., athletes who have shown extraordinary accomplishments. They are praised for this, and in this consists the honorific: the honorific is based on some quality or performance considered exceptional by some. Crucially, such an honorific can only have a meaning if the reason for it to be bestowed can be *contrasted* with situations in which it would be out of place. The honorific is bestowed on athletes who show, as I said, extraordinary accomplishments. They are "extra"-ordinary (beyond the ordinary) in the sense that ordinary people (or the athletes with whom they compete) cannot (or, in any event, do not) perform such feats.

In the case of "human dignity," the problem seems to be that everyone who is a human being is *eo ipso* qualified a proper candidate to have dignity bestowed on him. There is no contrast (not even with those who lack reason, who are still treated with dignity (if they cannot fend for themselves, they are not simply abandoned, which would probably mean their death, but are taken care of in special institutions)). There is, of course, the more fundamental contrast with non-humans (animals), but that is not relevant here: even if such a contrast could be defended within Kateb's theory (*quod non*), this would still not provide sufficient justification to speak of human dignity (at least not in all cases). If there is no criterion to bestow an honorific—as dignity may be said to be—the honorific itself loses all meaning.

That this problem ensues can be explained from the way the author qualifies "dignity," which is not unrelated to the issue of the inclusion of every human being in the realm

of subjects having dignity, for Kateb speaks of “human dignity” as an existential rather than a moral value (pp. 10-17). He demonstrates his awareness of the difference with a view such as Kant’s, who does connect dignity with morality (p. 13). (Incidentally, Kant speaks not about *human* dignity *per se*, arguing that any rational being may have dignity.) Kant’s approach faces some—or, rather, many—difficulties of its own, but he is in any case clear about the criteria for dignity to be bestowed on a being. Such an option seems ruled out in Kateb’s line of thought, insisting that “Human dignity is an existential value; value or worthiness is imputed to the identity of the person or the species” (p. 10). On page 24, Kateb says of human stature: “Human stature is essentially an existential, not a moral, value.”

An alternative would be, then, not to focus on the “human” part of “human dignity” but rather to deem a characteristic decisive which some may be said to exhibit and which others lack, such as rationality. Such an alternative brings its own complications with it, but these need not be discussed here as Kateb does not opt for it (indeed, as I indicated, the problem is rather that he does not choose at all). I mention it merely to remark that an alternative to Kateb’s theory, which would, of course, have to be examined just as critically, is not readily available, at least not as long as one aspires to present a theory that is just as elevated. Perhaps one may even reach the conclusion that such a project must be given up.

In any event, Kateb’s ambition seems to exceed what he can demonstrate, and the extent to which a theory must be justified corresponds with that of its claims rather than with its (intuitive) appeal or the aspirations of its originator. That is not to say that the book is without merit, but such merit lies primarily in indicating what is at stake in the human dignity debate, and in which setting such a debate can take place.