

# Dignity and Indignity

**Sherwin T. Wine**

WE HAVE many humanist values. Some of them, like equality and justice, are shared with non-humanists. Others, like skepticism and autonomy, are uniquely humanistic - or, more often than not, found in a secular approach to life and reality.

Whether they be shared or unique, humanist values derive from the satisfaction of human needs. They would not be desirable values if they were unrelated to human wants and inconsistent with human nature. We would not be humanistic if we recommended goals which were impossible for people to achieve and which aroused no human passion.

Humanist values are both ethical and trans-ethical. By "ethical" I mean that the values are conducive to the survival of groups and communities. Justice and love are obviously ethical. But even freedom and personal happiness strengthen families and nations. These very same values are trans-ethical when they are concerned only with the agenda of the individual or with some aesthetic ideal of what the individual should become. Autonomous people may be creative assets to their community. But they are also a reflection of what a "beautiful" human being ought to be.

Humanist values are frequently incompatible one with the other. Common sense tells us that we cannot promote justice and maximize the personal happiness of the privileged at the same time. Contemporary his-

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tory has taught us that equality and freedom may be enemies. If we insist on economic equality we will have to restrict the freedom of enterprising individuals. It would be nice if all humanist values harmonized with each other. And many humanist philosophers have insisted that this harmony exists and that all values can be subsumed under a single ultimate value like happiness or survival. But reality intrudes to prove this compatibility an illusion. Our values rub against each other because our desires do. Our evolutionary needs do not fit neatly into each other. Nature is less accommodating than nature-lovers are willing to admit. Life is a balancing act of choosing between the good and the good.

One humanist value that is becoming increasingly more prevalent is the goal of human dignity. In recent years, in particular the literature of psychotherapy and the propaganda of libertarians, feminists and ethnic minorities is filled with the praise of dignity. Although it is not clear that they all mean the same thing by the word, the demand for dignity has now become a societal cry.

### **Dignity**

If we mean by dignity an increasing sense of power over one's own life and an increasing sense of control over one's own future, then there are many echoes of this value in the humanist literature of the past.

The most strident voice for dignity was that of the much misunderstood German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. While racists and fascists have made his words mean what he never intended them to mean, his clear call for an alternative to the traditional ethic of humility laid the foundation for an ethic of dignity.

Humble people, he maintains, are primarily concerned with safety and security and stand in awe before the unknown. They fear their own power and envy the power of creative people. In their self-demeaning posture they place restraints upon the strong and give moral endorsement to self-effacement. Nietzsche, who despises the weakness of the humble and the glorification of weakness which their ethic endorses, proposes an alternative view:

The physiologists should take heed before they assume self-preservation as the cardinal drive of an organic being. Above all, a living thing wants to *discharge* its energy. Life, as such, is will to power. Self-preservation is only one of its indirect and most frequent consequences. In short, here as elsewhere, beware of superfluous teleological principles, such as the instinct for self-preservation.

What Nietzsche calls the will to power is what we, a century later, would call dignity. "God is dead" because we are no longer willing to alien-

ate our power to heavenly realms and to alienate our authority to divine beings. When we affirm our own power, we become the masters of our own destiny, even though we may risk our lives in that adventure. People of dignity are not terrified by death nor do they surrender to the narrow vision of good and evil which the envy of the weak and the fearful have devised for them.

The boldness of Nietzsche's assertion won the hearts of many "rebels" in the nineteenth and twentieth century. They loved its contempt for the values of traditional religion. And they loved the promise of personal liberation which seemed to flow from its defiance. The timidity of humanist attempts to base a morality on happiness and survival, or even justice, was now replaced by a romantic vision of human power and personal authority. Ultimately, the exaggerations of Nietzsche were softened and found their way into the literature of existentialism and the self-affirming assertions of the new psychotherapies of self-esteem.

From the very beginning it was clear that the morality of dignity was in conflict with both the egalitarianism of many political humanists and with the ethic of compassion which had been rescued from Christianity and de-theologized. It was clearly elitist in that it made aristocratic demands on human beings. And it was clearly anti-compassion in that it rejected both pity and guilt as appropriate motivations for human generosity. People of dignity chose to help others, not because they wanted to sacrifice themselves to the welfare of the needy, but because their ability to give was an affirmation of their own power and their own self-respect. They chose to love for the same reason.

The Nietzschean value system was "beyond morality" not only because it repudiated the old morality and substituted a new ethic, but also because it was trans-ethical. Its arguments were less concerned with the survival of groups and communities and more concerned with the personal agenda of finding oneself and with the aesthetic ideal of the "beautiful" human being.

For Nietzsche the will to power begins with self-mastery, a special balancing act between self-discipline, self-understanding and spontaneity which unleashes the pent up forces of creative energy and allows them to express themselves with boldness. In the process we come to experience ourselves as the masters of life and not as its humble servant. This self-mastery is the very essence of human dignity.

#### Meaning of Dignity

A distinction must here be made between dignity as a right and dignity as an achievement.

For many people dignity is equated with autonomy, the right to

make decisions for oneself. The autonomous person surrenders his will to no higher authority and accepts dictation from no intimidating power. Within this framework, dignity is conferred by other people on the person who seeks it. They do not rule his life and they give him the freedom to make his own decisions. To be autonomous requires no personal effort and no personal training. If other people give you your dignity, if they do not interfere with your decision making process, you are in charge of your life. You have autonomy.

This view of dignity stands opposed to the Nietzschean proposal. For Nietzsche the "ubermensch" condition is not a social right which can be conferred upon the individual. It is an achievement which requires enormous personal effort and training. Some people do not achieve self-mastery because they are unwilling to undertake the arduous task of preparing for it. Other people do not achieve dignity because they are incapable, either intellectually or emotionally, to complete the task. In this sense dignity is not available to everybody. It is available only to those who are willing or able to work for it.

Self-rule and self-mastery are not the same thing. In a freedom-loving egalitarian society it is fashionable to confer self-rule without demanding self-mastery. Countless numbers of people are told that they have the right to be in charge of their lives even though they do not possess the wisdom to understand the consequences of their behavior or the strength to resist the intimidation of public opinion. If out of their ignorance and weakness, they approve of a course of action, that approval is an expression of their autonomy and dignity.

Self-rule, without self-mastery, is an empty humanistic value. It is an open invitation to confuse the right to make decisions, even bad decisions, with the moral quality of the decisions themselves. "What I choose is right for me. What you choose is right for you." No accountability is desirable or possible. All is hopelessly subjective.

#### Requirements of Dignity

If we start out with the premise that dignity is self-mastery and that autonomy does not automatically confer dignity, then dignity requires a training program. The purpose of this program is to make the candidate stronger and wiser. By stronger we mean the power to resist the informal tyranny of the group. By wiser we mean responsibility to the evidence of human experience. Self-mastery is no peevish assertion of "my right to run my own life." It is the sensitivity to understand what I need, the knowledge to comprehend what the realistic consequences of my behavior are and the skills to carry out the decisions that I have made.

The first step to self-mastery is my willingness to listen to the experiences of other people who share the human condition - not only the peo-

pie of the present but the people of the past as well. Education is more than introspection. It is, in addition, an attempt to make contact with the external world, with an objective reality which determines the results of my actions. This reality also defines the limits of my power.

The second step of self-mastery is my ability to cope with frustration and hostility. If I lack determination and perspective I will fail to discipline my fear and my anger - and I will lose control of life. Long run goals will be impossible to achieve. And I will be the victim of every momentary terror or rage.

The third step to self-mastery is to establish a priority list of values so that my life has consistency and direction. Since these values, in their total fulfillment are incompatible, my priority list will define the balance among them. Whatever balance I choose will enhance the sense of control I have over my life.

In the end self-mastery is a long journey of intense discipline. Real dignity is not something that can be demanded. It has to be earned.

### **Relationships**

Dignity is not always ethical. If the skills of independent judgment and action grow stronger and stronger, the bond between the individual and society may be weakened. Some individuals may use their new strength to benefit others. But some people may use their self-sufficiency to withdraw from social involvement and to pursue their own agenda. The first alternative produces the men and women of honor and *noblesse oblige*. The second alternative yields the willful "stars" of Ayn Rand novels.

Dignity does not always fit well with happiness. The struggle for self-mastery may be both tedious and painful. Being in control and responsible may enhance self-esteem. But it is sometimes a chilling and terrifying posture. Comfortable dependencies may be less stressful and more conducive to easy living. Strong and vital people may be the most "beautiful" people. But they are not necessarily the happiest. Dignity is frequently at odds with survival. Men and women of dignity do not accept humiliating subservience. If enemies seek to oppress them and to deprive them of their freedom, they offer resistance, even at the risk of their own lives. Death is preferable to slavery. Certainly the good-humored pragmatic skills of more obsequious people will enable them to survive tyrants more easily.

Dignity is never compatible with compassionate self-sacrifice. People of dignity never choose to be pitiable. Nor do they admire other people who have become pitiable. While they may empathize with the suffering of others, and while they may risk their lives and fortunes to alleviate this suffering, they choose to be generous as an expression of their own power to help and be useful - and not as a manifestation of a modest and self-effacing

love.

#### Challenges To Dignity

Dignity is pre-eminently individualistic. But, in the twentieth century many of the political, social and economic developments are anti-individualistic.

Specialization is anti-dignity. The increasing narrowing of professional and vocational skills makes each of us more competent in one field and less competent in all the others. Our confined skills make us more vulnerable and more dependent on the services of others. The "Renaissance man" is no longer a possibility.

Modern technology is also often anti-dignity. Machines that relieve us of physical labor seem to be liberating. But they encourage infantile dependencies. We use the machines but do not know how to make them or repair them. Machines that relieve us of mental labor and do our thinking for us are much more frightening. Our minds are now integrated with information systems that span the globe and merge our organic and inorganic intelligence into a worldwide network of facts, thoughts and opinions. The boundaries between one mind and that of another are beginning to blur.

Corporate structures, both state and private, make individualists a rare breed and replace loner creativity with team work. It may be the case that collectivist structures, by emphasizing the values of loyalty and cooperation, will be conducive to the strengthening of ethical values. But they are hardly supportive of dignity. They give the individuals who have given themselves over to these corporate structures a decreasing sense of control over their own lives.

#### Conclusion

Humanism in the twenty-first century will have to deal with the continuing appeal of dignity as a humanist value. As a dramatic contrast to other goals, such as happiness and survival, it will remain foremost.

But it will not have an easy road. Humanism will be assaulted by the advocates of pseudo-dignity, the political cult of instant autonomy. It will also face assault by the integrationist character of modern social development.

No humanism will be complete that ignores its power.