

## *Human Dignity and Justice*

---

The language of “human dignity” plays a key role in discussions of justice and human rights. And yet, the concept of human dignity presents significant challenges that often go unacknowledged in the realm of public discourse. What do we mean when we say that humans have dignity? And what kind of claim is it? Is it a claim based on some kind of comprehensive worldview or set of worldviews? Is it simply a pragmatic assertion—one that, hopefully, leads to less violence and a more just world?

Of central concern here is the status of human rights and global justice. The language of human rights appears again and again in the pages of this issue, not surprisingly since numerous human rights documents—in particular, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights—refer to humans as having dignity and to this dignity as being the basis for human rights. What is the relationship between this triad of terms: “human rights,” “human dignity,” and “justice”? And what are the implicit assumptions in these terms that need to be explored?

Contemporary skepticism regarding universal accounts of human nature raises doubts about the idea of human dignity. For some, a universal human nature is a myth and what it is to be a human person is exclusively shaped by our local and social contexts; transcendent accounts of why the lives of all persons should be valued do not make sense. Against this backdrop, one might ask whether a rhetoric of human dignity can be sustained and whether calls to honor the dignity of every individual can gain traction.

The questions concerning human dignity are not limited to the conflict between universal and particular understandings of the human. The bare facts of human history—the long list of atrocities for which humanity must answer—raise some serious questions about why or if we think humans have dignity. Would another intelligent species, viewing the range of human actions throughout history (or, even, currently occurring), arrive at the idea that humans have dignity? If dignity is associated with goodness and innocence, then it seems to weaken in the face of human behavior.

Here is the quandary that this issue of *The Hedgehog Review* explores: there are strong challenges to the idea of human dignity, and yet the pursuit of justice seems to be dependent on this idea, or one like it. Is it possible to sustain justice without the idea of human dignity, or a similar concept? Can we pursue justice independently of any robust theorizing about these matters? Without the commitment to a dignity that extends to all human beings, we seem to be left with value structures that have little or no commerce with each other.

Considered from a different direction, it is not clear precisely what follows from the claim of human dignity, either for those whose commitment is broadly theoretical or for those who marshal the concept in support of various causes. Does respect for the value of each and every human being have any direct implications for public policy? Does it provide substantive guidance to those who are working to relieve suffering and combat injustice?

In this issue, we take up these crucial questions, trying to bring some conceptual clarity to terms that are frequently used but often without adequate reflection on their meaning. Without a closer look at the assumptions brought to, but unexplored in, discussions of justice and human dignity, we cannot hope to sustain the human rights efforts that cross our globe—particularly since these assumptions are not uniform, or even necessarily compatible, across cultures or communities. While we are optimistic regarding the fruitfulness of a discourse of human dignity, it is unwise to dismiss theoretical challenges out-of-hand. For any idea to make good on its promise, it must be capable of withstanding the most rigorous and critical of examinations. In what follows we try to bring into view some of the fundamental assumptions that ground the language of human dignity and justice and to engage the challenges that this language faces in our world today.

—T.H.R.