

Dignity Rather than Right

John Milbank

1. Dignity and Right today

The current academic debate about human dignity has a strange feature. Unlike most such debates it scarcely commences with any obvious, given theoretical importance of the topic. Instead, it begins with the circumstance that ‘dignity’ and its verbal cognates have increasingly entered into our legal and media descriptions of human nature and its predicaments. For some, this usage is a superficial ornament to a more basic discourse of ‘rights’, and therefore ‘dignity’ should be a subject of at best rhetorical and not substantive consideration. At worst it is a cipher for outmoded, hierarchical and essentialist dogmas that tends to dilute a recognition and extension of the rights of humanity. For others, ‘dignity’ is held in some way to supplement ‘rights’ while for a small intellectual minority (myself included) it is seen as a more valid alternative to ‘rights’.

Yet all parties to this obscure debate concerning dignity (should there be a debate at all? what is this debate about?) agree that it arises not initially from academic reflection or first principles – ironically enough, since *dignitas* in one sense of scholastic usage denoted ‘first principle’ – but from academic reflection on recent public usage.

This usage can be doubly dated. Primarily, ‘human dignity’ was yoked to ‘human rights’ after 1948 in both the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the old German Federal Republic’s provisional (in view of the division of the country) *Grundgesetz*.¹ One can understand this yoking loosely in terms of a double rejection both of totalitarian suppression of human freedom and of unprecedentedly brutal treatment of certain classes human beings which deliberately or effectively denied their human status.

But more precisely one can understand this yoking in terms of the coming together of two quite different and indeed fundamentally opposed traditions of political and ethical reflection. The first is the liberal, eventually secular tradition of human rights that had been made the basis of the American Constitution and more fitfully of the various French constitutions since the Revolution.² For this tradition, the high status of human beings is self-given, whether because they ‘own themselves’ (the Lockean tradition of ‘possessive individualism’) or because they are divinely constituted as originally free and must therefore accord themselves a sacred respect as the trustees of an untradeable liberty (the Rousseauian tradition). It should be noticed here that the French tradition of rights is more emphatically civil-religious – and even residually Christian – than the American one. But in either case right is derived from the exercise of subjective freedom or from human autonomy and requires no other foundation. Little or no mention is made of ‘dignity’.

¹ See Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2012), 38-47, 77-104.

² See Samuel Moyn, ‘Did the Irish Save Civilisation? The Secret History of Constitutional Dignity’ in this volume. Also Michael Rosen, ‘Dignity Past and Present’ in Jeremy Waldron, *Dignity, Rank and Rights* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2012), 89-98 and ‘Dignity: the Case Against’ in the present volume.

The other tradition is largely Catholic, though it has many parallels in other Christian denominations. It concerns a defence of human existence in all its modes in terms of the category of 'dignity'. In this discourse, which arose in the 19th C, there is a fluctuation between the notion of respect for the dignity of the human person as such and respect for various human roles such as, above all, the 'dignity of labour'. Such fluctuation, as I shall explain, is both endemic to and coherent within the entire notion of 'dignity' as it had been inherited from Classical, Patristic and Medieval times. For this reason it would be wrong to see respective emphases upon the dignity of the human as such, or else upon the dignity of roles or groups as theoretical alternatives.

Nevertheless it is clearly the case, as Samuel Moyn has described, that during the 1930's and the 1940's Catholic thought gradually moved from a 'corporatist' stress on the dignity of groups to a 'personalist' stress on the dignity of the individual, with the Irish Republic commendably and prophetically drafting this shift into its constitution, thanks to Eamon de Valera's wise refusal of the fascist version of corporatist doctrine.³

This evolution is crucial to understanding how the unlikely marriage of rights with dignity was consecrated after the Second World War. The other key to understanding this seeming miscegenation is the crucial importance of Kantian thought in this period, especially in Germany. For Kant had assumed and further spiritualised Rousseau's approach to right and liberty: we do not own our own freedom which is a divine gift, trumping the mutability and tradeability of the material sphere. Hence it is morally illicit to commit suicide, tell a lie or surrender to sensuality for its own sake.

³ Moyn, 'Did the Irish Save Civilisation?'

Just for this reason Kant had spoken of human dignity or *würde*.⁴ So both in terms of the rhetoric of the dignity of the person and of substantive moral commitments, the Kantian legacy was able to mediate between the liberal and the Catholic positions.

However, I agree with both Moyn and Michael Rosen that this fusion is much more unstable than has often appeared to be the case. One can point to this instability in three ways.

First, one can refer to the second datable upsurge in discourse about ‘human dignity’. This has occurred since 2001. The reasons for this ‘second wave’ are somewhat more obscure, but it can plausibly be taken that they parallel the reasons for the first wave. People have been horrified by the scant respect for human life, human suffering and the accepted modes of human existence and human interaction exhibited both by terrorists and states since 9/11. One senses a concern that respect for ‘rights’ does not sufficiently cover what counts as humane and respectful treatment of people, especially in circumstances of incarceration. Also, an anxiety that ‘rights’ supposedly based upon autonomy and contract can logically be suspended in the case of ‘terrorists’ who refuse that contract and the basis of contract in respect for human liberty as such. Even refugees who have been accidentally placed outside state and legal contract often seem to fall in consequence beyond the sway of ‘right’. And in either case loss of ‘right’ seems to result in a loss of humanity, a casting out into a limbo status unworthy of either the respect we accord to humans or the sympathy we sometimes accord to animals. For even though rights are deemed ‘natural’, if no pre-political divine establishment and enforcement of rights is admitted, then natural

⁴ See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2012).

rights must, paradoxically, be positively instituted by human law. They are only 'natural' in the Hobbesian sense of being founded upon a supposedly natural condition of pre-contractual egotism, which was not, in itself, a state of 'right'. In a usually inchoate and inexplicit way the resurgence of appeal to dignity besides right or even as the foundation of right seems to register an anxiety about the limits of secular recognition of human worth as 'right', as just indicated.

If this reading is correct, then there is also a parallel to post 1948 in terms of a reaching back to the Christian category of 'dignity' in the face of modern oppression and atrocity. However, in the earlier case this was far more explicit. What is more, the current reaching back is far more confused and contested. Nazi, Fascist and Communist oppression could validly be understood as secular oppression, but today we are faced more distinctly with the phenomena of politicised religious fascisms – in Saudi Arabia and in Hungary, to give two examples. If, for some few 'creative minorities' the perversion of religion combined with the anti-personalist tendencies of technocratic modernity calls for the revival of an authentically religious vision, for many more a refusal of violence deemed religious in origin demands a further insistence on purely liberal, secular norms in public life. There follows from this either a rejection of dignity-talk or else a Kantian reading of dignity as autonomy.

Furthermore, the horrors of Nazi and Japanese eugenicism and genocide permitted, after 1948, a novel converging of liberal and Christian moral perspectives, whereas prior to that date liberal opinion had broadly favoured eugenicist projects. Today, however, the invocation of 'dignity' is split between liberals who speak of 'the right to a dignified death' and Christians who emphasise the dignity beyond freedom and

autonomy of the human foetus, the child, the disabled, the mentally impaired, the sick, the old and the dying. Christians also stress the dignity of human life as such, rendering unacceptable the unprecedented rupture of the natural coincidence of human election and natural process as envisaged by sperm or egg donation, just as they view with wariness tendencies to ‘hybridise’ the human or reduce the human mind to brain function understood in computerised terms.

It should be noted here that this is a division explicitly between religious people and secular *liberals*: the few remaining genuine socialists and Marxists often exhibit much more sympathy with Catholic positions on life, birth, sexuality and death. But if today Catholics and socialists echo the post 1948 resistance to the modern compromising of our shared humanity, their reassertion of ‘dignity’ is more widely resisted and rejected.

The second reason for the instability of the alliance between right and dignity concerns the nature of Catholic social teaching. Both Moyn and Rosen somewhat exaggerate the ruptures that have occurred here and play down a ground-bass of continuity. While it is true that Papal support for the dignity of rule, law, labour and women rested on hierarchical assumptions, it is nevertheless the case that the emphasis on the dignity of labour was a novel response to the collapse of the alliance of throne and altar. In the face of this collapse, a deliberate, bold and wholly novel overture was made towards the common people. If labour remained subordinate, its role was nevertheless vastly elevated in theory and in enabling practice. Much more of early Catholic social teaching shared assumptions and borrowed terms with the legacy of pre 1948 – often religiously-inspired -- socialism than is often allowed,

precisely because the latter also understood itself as ‘a third way’ between reactionary invocation of the *ancien régime* on the one hand and predatory and iconoclastic liberalism on the other.⁵

Moreover, this overture was by no means merely opportunistic, because it was realised that the political theologies that had supported or defended the *ancien régime* were by no means authentically in continuity with a Classical, Patristic and Thomistic legacy. To the contrary, they tended to be based upon theological voluntarisms and positivisms which elevated the power of the one ruler to absoluteness and conceived of hierarchy as given, fixed and arbitrary. This was validly read as a betrayal of the Thomistic support for mixed constitution and a dynamic hierarchy based upon virtue and function benefiting the common good and so each every member of the political community.⁶

Such an outlook was already inseparable from the Thomistic understanding of the dignity of the individual person who ‘exists for himself’ (though not with a absolute, modern self-ownership) in terms of his or her possession of rationality and freedom.⁷ This dignity requires in some sense the political participation of all.

It is therefore wrong to say that Catholic corporatism contained no personalist dimension, or that the dignity of the group was entirely disconnected from the dignity of the person, even in the 19th C. Within a Catholic outlook it would have been

⁵ See John Milbank, ‘On Complex Space’ in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 268-292 and Jean-Claude Michéa, *The Realm of Lesser Evil*, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge, Polity, 2007).

⁶ See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 51-100.

⁷ ST II. II. q 64 a.2 ad 2.

impossible to speak of the dignity of labour without invoking the dignity of the human person, because this thesis announces that labour is an authentic way to be human – not to be a labourer, which would be tautologous. If, nevertheless, the dignity of the human being as such was less spoken of in that era, then this is because neo-Thomistic thought, in keeping with both Aristotle and Aquinas, did not think of human universality as something that could be atomically and empirically instanced as an abstract property that is literally the same and equal in all (as liberalism does), but rather as something always analogically differentiated in various conditions of life (including diversity of gender) of talent, ascribed and elected social role. In other words, Catholic social teaching realistically considered that it would be *vacuous* to focus in practice on the dignity and rights of human beings as such and not on the several dignities of human being in their various functions as they actually are *in the specifically modern world*.

What then, are we to make of the rupture rightly spoken of by Moyn between ‘civil society Catholics’ and ‘Corporatist Catholics’ in the 1930’s? I would submit that we cannot understand this merely in terms of an increasing reaction against totalitarianism and *rapprochement* with liberalism. Rather, one should realise that one wing (and one wing only) of Catholic corporatism had moved *away* from personalism towards a dogmatic group-organicism under the influence of the Comtian, positivist legacy. The primacy of the social whole as ‘revealed’ was first asserted by Catholic traditionalists like Louis de Bonald after the French revolution. Auguste Comte then secularised this in terms of the natural primacy of the social and the sacrality of the social. One can only understand the phenomenon of *Action Française* and the more Catholic variants of fascism in Portugal, Spain and (to a lesser extent) Italy if one

realises that these were to a degree diabolical alliances of Catholics ‘re-traditionalising’ the Comtean legacy, with secular positivists like Charles Maurras who had switched from civil religion to an ‘instrumental’ advocacy of Catholicism.⁸

Because of this alliance, the priority of the dignity of the group came to mean the priority of material, political and secular exigencies with an ‘integral’ role for faith blasphemously subordinate to them. Against this Jacques Maritain and others prophetically asserted ‘the priority of the spiritual’ and the dignity above all of the human person. However, as the title of his most crucial political work *Humanisme Intégrale* indicates, Maritain had by no means abandoned an ‘integral’ politics guided by both faith and reason, just as its contents prove that he had by no means abandoned corporatism, as indeed Moyn acknowledges.

Therefore the ‘change’ in Catholic political thinking has to be primarily understood as an equal removal from Catholic traditionalism and secular positivism. In both cases then, we are not talking about something primarily reactive or compromising. To the contrary, we are considering an aspect of that *ressourcement* which is the key feature of 20th C Catholic theology as a whole: a return to the authentic founts of theological understanding up to 1300 and more sporadically thereafter.

For this understanding, personalism and corporatism are complementary rather than in tension with each other. For to value the dignity of the person is not to value an abstract bearer of free-will, equivalent to all other such bearers, but to value the individual both as rationally free and as possessing an irreplaceably specific character.

⁸ See John Milbank, ‘Politique (Théologie)’ in Jean-Yves Lacoste ed., *Dictionnaire Critique de Théologie* (Paris: PUF, 1998).

It is for this latter reason that each and every person is 'more' than the mere totality of people. But character – as Aristotle, Cicero and Aquinas make clear – is not just given by nature but is also habitually acquired, ascribed and chosen. It therefore does not exist outside relationality and social reciprocity. In consequence, one cannot respect a man and despise him as miner, son, father, cricket-player or lover.

It might seem as if stressing the dignity of his role would run the danger of subordinating him to his function for the social organism; but this only follows for traditionalism and positivism, not for an Aristotelian and Thomistic view which defines the purpose of the social and political whole as securing reciprocal justice and the always specific virtuous flourishing of each of its members. Indeed, one can turn the tables on liberalism here: if we mainly respect a man as a man *per se*, then this formalism can readily turn out to be compatible with all and every exploitation of him *qua* miner, son, father, fast bowler etc. In consequence, these functions do indeed get reduced to merely instrumental functions of a machinic totality. Functions cease to be personally infused if, with false idealism and piety, we try to divorce personhood from function or, better, 'role'.

This false idealism informs every liberal constitutionalism (in the modern, Lockean sense) insofar as it only recognises persons as bearers of abstract rights as individuals, and otherwise regards social and economic life as 'politically indifferent'. This means that it only interferes with the latter in terms of laying down ground-rules for fair-play between independent human freedoms. It does not seek to ascribe any inherently desirable goals for social and economic activities. This 'asocial' and 'aneconomic' theory of the state (wildly discordant with even modern political realities) involves as

its concomitant an ‘apolitical’ theory of the social and the economic. However, if, as for Aristotle, the aim of politics is to produce virtuously flourishing citizens, then, since people only develop characters through social and economic relations, the nature of these relations and their aims cannot be treated as a matter of political indifference. Inversely, the goal of social and economic relating will not be mainly the satisfaction of private predilections, but relationship as such and the good of the other in the widest possible range (as both Aristotle and Cicero affirm). The widest possible range is the *polis* seen as the ‘biggest society’ and the widest scope of just reciprocity (for Aristotle) or the obscure international society of the *cosmopolis* (for Cicero).

This rejection of ‘the separation of political from socio-economic powers’ is a necessary conclusion of any authentically Christian political thinking, and yet it is the simple core of corporatism. To nurture the person one must nurture social groups and economic vocations. In order to widen personal political participation or *democracy*, one must ensure that every individual can exercise political influence through the workplace and with those with which he shares a common purpose. By contrast, merely representative democracy (which nevertheless has its place) assumes that there is in any case little impact to be made on most of human life through the political process, which indeed is for liberalism *undemocratically* defined as primarily the upholding of contractual rights which as ‘natural’ do not need voting on, and the securing of social and economic ‘fair play’. Democratic decision is here reduced to mass adjudication concerning the endless ‘hard cases’ to be decided within these terms of reference, while liberal constitutions (above all that of the USA) are devised to prevent any representation of a collective will from rejecting the ground-rules of liberalism itself.

Understood in these broad but authentic terms, corporatism may have been more muted in Catholic social teaching and practice since WW 2, but it has never gone away. Indeed, quite to the contrary, West Germany adopted (under British rather than American encouragement) powerfully corporatist elements, purged of most fascist statism, into its postwar settlement.⁹ And what is more, these elements, such as close alliance of local business and local government, vocational training, vocational associations, high-entry qualifications and alliance of traditional craft-skills with modern technology, have proved capable of delivering sustainable economic success as well as greater personal fulfilment compared with typical ‘Anglo-Saxon’ practice.

Equally, in recent Papal social teaching, the stress on the vocational and its (entirely ‘illiberal’) political relevance has been paramount. Nor is Rosen right to say that Catholic social thought has abandoned its predication upon metaphysical and social hierarchy. ‘Subsidiarity’ is clearly a hierarchical doctrine, since it teaches that political, social and economic functions should be fulfilled at the most appropriate *levels* and preferably at the lowest ones. Such a conception assumes that there is a socio-political pyramid with rule at the top only authenticated by its guardianship of the common good under both divine grant and popular assent. (Derivation only from the latter, as with liberalism, has *never* been Papally conceded.) The key shift here came with the reclaiming of this link of height to responsibility under law, and of rank to achieved virtue, in the 19th C rejection of – essentially modern, voluntarist and so in a sense ‘liberal’ – *ancien régime* notions. It did not come with any supposed 20th C

⁹ See Maurice Glasman, *Unnecessary Suffering: Management, Markets and the Liquidation of Solidarity* (London: Verso, 1996).

rejection of organic hierarchy which remains essential to the notion of subsidiary cooperation.

Equally, the doctrine of subsidiarity remains corporatist, since it seeks to devolve central sovereign powers to groups which are vocational as well as voluntary; regarded as interlocking in function and as contributive to the flourishing of the political whole.

How, then, is one to square these conclusions with the very evident embrace of liberal democracy by the Catholic Church and the Papacy since WW 2?

Three comments are in order here: first, there is a genuine and valid recognition that liberalism does, indeed, especially given a poor degree of consent about the common good, afford some protection against the worst intrusions upon the freedoms of some by the freedom of others. It is mature and balanced to say that liberalism offers a certain political good, but that this remains insufficient. Second, modern Catholicism tends to read individual rights in ‘personalist’ terms which regard the individual not in isolation but as the most basic rung in a subsidiarist vision that is in continuity with older ‘distributist’ notions. What an individual can do for herself, own for herself, grow for herself, make for herself, she should. Inversely, she should be able to appeal against an oppressive group, just as a group has the right to appeal against an oppressive higher body and ultimately the state. But the claim to rights of the individual necessarily closes the circle: she must appeal back to the state, thereby revealing a hidden reciprocalist aspect to subsidiarist hierarchy. The latter is not a kind of ‘group liberalism’ which regards the state as a necessary evil: rather, the state

itself should sometimes ‘kenotically’ reach down to protect the individual person against the group, or smaller groups against greater ones, as in the protection of small businesses against greater ones and against monopoly. This indeed was traditionally the populist argument for the need for ‘monarchy’ as against merely ‘aristocratic’ power: the One must sometimes defend the Many against the virtuous Few turned corruptly oligarchic.

But the third comment is to recognise that indeed some Vatican II documents did concede too much to liberal democracy.¹⁰ This was understandable, given the reaction to totalitarianism and the apparently optimistic prospects for this ideology in the early 1960’s. Neither the growth of a brutal economic neoliberalism, nor the rise of a cultural liberalism that would both eventually threaten the very character of our shared human existence was envisaged. It is however clear that Papal and the most sophisticated academic Catholic thought has gradually backed away from this excessive embrace.

So far then, we have seen how both new historical circumstances and the essential continuity of modern Catholic social teaching both suggest that the alliance of right with dignity is an unnatural one. For if, prior to 1948 secular rights discourse never mentioned ‘dignity’, then equally Catholic dignity discourse scarcely mentioned ‘right’ in the modern subjective sense. It follows that perhaps the most crucial remaining question mark over the postwar liberal-tending legacy in Catholic thought, remains to do with human rights. At times, Papal and other Catholic writings seem to embrace these in liberal, Kantian terms which would suggest a grounding in

¹⁰ See Tracey Rowland’s, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2002).

autonomy, with dignity redundant as ground, if also invoked as a supplement. This results sometimes in contorted attempts to defend the unborn and the dying in terms of a rights-talk that is predicated upon the autonomy of the adult human. In reality the rejection of liberalism with respect to issues of life, death sexuality and gender does not indicate a residual disagreement with liberalism in just these areas, nor a 'different' Catholic understanding of subjective right, but rather exposes to view the fact that Catholicism remains at bottom incompatible with liberal notions of rights and democracy. (It has to be added here that sometimes a 'rights' perspective leads bizarrely to *excessive* 'conservatism' in these areas, that is more restrictive than the usual medieval positions – for example with respect to abortion.) The Catholic Church would be far better able explain itself, and to explain the genuine core radicalism (after some needed theoretical pruning) of its positions in these areas if it consistently abandoned right in favour of dignity and criticised the abuses of justice consequent upon the hegemony of rights with respect to more political and economic issues also.

Yet perhaps more frequently 'rights' are fortunately so qualified by the modern Catholic Church as scarcely to mean rights in the modern sense at all. For they are deemed to correlate with the equally foundational duties of others, or else to coincide with equally foundational obligations of the rights-holder. One is led to the view that, in the face of the dominance of the human rights agenda (and the frequently noble causes that it espouses) that the Catholic Church tends apparently to adopt it, but in reality smuggles in ancient objective *ius* under the guise of modern subjective right. In substantive terms this means that it is indeed allowed that one can have a legitimate subjective claim to an objective *ius*, but not that such a *ius* is *ever* derived from

human self-willing alone, even if the adjudication of rights accords (as did Aquinas, and more than Aristotle) such a capacity a high moral and legal relevance.¹¹

To the new circumstances of the 21st C and the continued non-liberalism of Catholic social teaching one must add, as a third factor inciting tension in the enforced nuptial of right and dignity, the truth that Kantian mediation is unstable. Basically, where Kantian freedom degenerates into possessive individualism, or mere consumer freedom of choice, it ceases to be of strict ethical relevance or therefore to offer any ethical criterion in Kantian rather than Lockean terms, which quickly reduce to the securing of property rights and private material utility. (Rawls's Kantian pupils, Christian Korsgaard and Onora O'Neill, simply reduce Kant to Locke, as Rosen rightly indicates.)¹² But where to the contrary Kantian freedom remains 'dignified' and 'sublime', then it is of little practical and material relevance.

This is because Kant admitted that it is actually impossible to know whether one has acted out of a pure categorical imperative that treats people only as ends and can be universalised, and not out of a contingent imperative contaminated by sensual spontaneity and utility. One can only 'will to will' and be justified after all by Lutheran faith and not ethical action. This is why, as Rosen argues, Kant does not offer a humanist but a noumenal ethics (applying most of all to angels) and yet we only have a compromised human access to this ethics, mediated by a 'sublime feeling'

¹¹ See John Milbank, 'Against Human Rights: Liberty in the Western Tradition' in *Oxford Journal of Law and Theology*, January 2012, pp 1-32.

¹² Rosen, *Dignity*, 87-89, 145-147,

for the moral law which should be willed (but cannot be so willed by us, because of ‘radical evil’) purely dispassionately.¹³

Kantian ethics are then, in theory religious. But even in terms of Kantian practice according to Kant they have always to be supplemented, compromised and even betrayed by a mere aesthetics of sympathy and pursuit of utility. Inevitably then (and whether one is an atheist or not), the Kantian respect for free will as freedom, since one is the guardian of the divine gift of freedom, reduces after all in social practice to the willing *of something*, which may always be an impure will and so to a Lockean and ‘consumerist’ freedom of choice, which may be swayed by all sorts of sensual and selfish or utilitarian impulses, now rendered legitimate. Certainly, in Kantian terms we must always keep our word and tell the truth *in the ethical world*, but not necessarily in the pragmatic-political one in which we always also live. And how can we be sure that we are telling the truth for the right reasons or telling it in the right way that really respects the other’s freedom?

Therefore the admitted sublimity of Kantian freedom is without real ethical effect and his notions of human dignity fail to derive right from the dignity of freedom rather than from its sheer autonomy. What is more, any atheist construal of Kant will prove unable to explain why a free-willing against one’s freedom does not still uphold a self-derived freedom. In consequence it no longer knows, as we increasingly see, why we should not be allowed to kill ourselves or sell ourselves into erotic bondage.

¹³ See John Milbank, ‘Evil: Darkness and Silence’ in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London, Routledge, 2003), 1-25.

So all the above considerations lead to a strong conclusion about the impact of the life, death, sex and gender issues which are driving a new wedge between right and dignity. They do not tend to show a merely ‘residual’ area of disagreement between these two perspectives, nor that the Catholic Church retains a different conception of dignity despite its full acceptance of the priority of the individual. Instead, they expose to view what has always secretly been the case: namely that ‘right’ and ‘dignity’ stand for two radically opposed political philosophies and indeed for the two *most* opposed political philosophies: namely the politics of the moderns and the politics of the ancients. For the Catholic conception of personal dignity continues to imply that universal dignity can only be expressed by the dignity of group, rank and status, while the Kantian notion of dignity is impotent to dislodge the liberal founding of dignity or worth upon right and so upon subjective autonomy.

One could say that the liberal view sees dignity as an ‘internal’ phenomenon of concealed willing, while the Catholic view sees dignity as an ‘external’ phenomenon of human position within the cosmic order and equally of individual human position within the social order.

2. Liberal Dignity as Duty or Utility

In that sense, ‘internal’ versus ‘external’ would seem to express two *divergent* conceptions of dignity. However, I shall now show why this is far too simplistic. For first, modern conceptions of dignity after all split internally between interior and exterior in their own specific way. And second, so do ancient and medieval ones, but

in a different way, that traces back to an etymological and cultural ambiguity in the notion of *dignitas* as such. Eventually I will try to show that the key contrast turns out to be not after all between internal and external, but rather between a modern incapacity to *mediate* these two aspects, compared with the ancient perspective, especially in its Catholic Christian variant.

First, the modern division and disjunction of the dignified. Take the notion of ‘dying with dignity’. This refers in part to the interior dimension of human life: our capacity for a rational exercise of freedom. A dignified death is, supposedly, a death whose place and hour has, in theory, been freely chosen by the individual who is mortally ill, at a point before he has lost all capacity for autonomous decision and so, for this perspective, all dignity.

Yet dignity with respect to death also refers in part to the most external circumstances of human life. A ‘dignified death’ is taken to be one that involves a minimum of pain, discomfort, physical mess or distressing circumstances.

This split clearly reflects a more general modern split between deontological and utilitarian approaches to ethics – especially if we take the ‘utile’ to refer in the widest possible sense to the convenient and pleasurable. Thus the same duality of dignity is extended from death to life in general. On the one hand to live with dignity is to live not in any sense as a slave but as an autonomous being who has chosen or at least assented to her career, dwelling-place, friendships and economic contracts. On the other hand, a ‘dignified’ life is taken to be one where we enjoy enough food, decent shelter and clothing, protection from the natural environment, mechanised transport

and access to professional healthcare, educational expertise and informational and social media.

Again we see the contrast between, and yet typical combination of, the deontological and the utilitarian. Deontological aspects of dignity more readily apply to human adults, while utilitarian ones extend to children and to a lesser degree are extended to certain animals. ‘To treat with dignity’ as an according of respect to others tends to mean a respect both for their freedom and their comfort in a sense that extends to their being able to adopt a normative style of behaviour and dress that typifies human status. Michael Rosen struggles to explain how he personally requires a dignified treatment of dead bodies in secular terms outside these ethical frameworks – that is to say even when no human freedom is at issue and no pleasure or displeasure to the living.¹⁴ More to the point might be the observation that in fact respectful treatment of the dead (as of the dying) is increasingly violated in secular society.

It is therefore not simply the case that liberalism thinks of dignity as invisible right, while Catholicism thinks of dignity as visible status. For it also turns out that liberalism combines the invisible dignity of right with the visible dignity of style and convenience. A lack of integration between the two is revealed in the fluctuations of public policy where we possess no criterion by which to decide whether to concentrate on making people freer or more comfortable, ecstatically liberated or soberly healthy. In consequence we often end up contradictorily pursuing libertinism in one domain and Spartan discipline in others: for example liberalising drug laws while extending draconian bans on smoking or permitting adult pornography while

¹⁴ Rosen, *Dignity*, 129-160.

forbidding children from even touching each other (as in at least one Australian State today). The most synthesis we can ever achieve is a banal one that divides and rules the two incompatible modern ethical theories: thus people are rendered freer ‘to chose’ between ferociously marketed different versions of comfortable indulgence and programmes for self-discipline. The same pseudo-synthesis also works a dialectical reversion: austere deontology deconstructs into self-indulgent choice; sympathetic utilitarianism deconstructs into the rigours of hedonistic spectacle.

3. Dignity as Reserve or Dignity as Honour in Classical Political Theory

However, the political legacy that Catholicism inherits had, from the outset, its own mode of doubling dignity between the visible and the invisible. The Latin *dignitas* lies close to the word *decus* meaning ‘ornament’ or ‘honourable reward,’ and also to *decorum* meaning socially acceptable ethical style, and ultimately to the Greek *dokein*, meaning to show and *doxa*, meaning shining manifestation, glory or honour, inherently proceeding or bestowed from without. Yet on the other hand, as Mette Lebech points out in an admirable article, *dignitas* also translates the Greek *axia* meaning not just fundamental worth but also ‘first principle’, as in our derivative ‘axiom’.¹⁵ Hence the scholastics translated the Greek *axia* in logical and mathematical contexts as *dignitas*. So for Aquinas, for example, *dignitas* means both something good in itself and something taken to be true in itself.¹⁶

¹⁵ Mette Lebech, ‘What is Human Dignity?’ in *Maynooth Philosophical Papers* ed. M. Lebech (Maynooth, Maynooth UP, 2004), 59-69.

¹⁶ See Lebech and Rosen, *Dignity*, 16-17.

This suggests something like a ‘paradox of dignity’. The dignified is self-standing and independent. As such it is sufficient to itself and so reserved. Yet the dignified is equally what gloriously shows itself and even that which receives a supplement of honour from others. It is at once (like the number One in ancient mathematics) that which requires no addition and yet is the very principle of addition. In fact we still tend to register a paradox when we ascribe dignity: ‘dignified motion’ for example is a motion that somehow moves without deserting a statue-like immobile erectness; ‘a dignified gesture’ is one that somehow combines reserve – or non-gesture -- with expression that necessarily negates reserve. Like sublime speech in rhetoric (which is itself for the tradition ‘dignified speech’ in contrast to the charm and delight of conversation) the dignified gesture makes a simpler and greater impact precisely through the exercise of restraint.

And this paradox is no trivial thing: instead dignity as both reserved and manifest would seem to have been the very heart of the classically syncretic ideal of the fully-rounded man (*sic*) – the individual of wise contemplation who bestows his gifts of wisdom through practical action in the city. Yet this ideal was but precariously held together, as we can see if we examine the respective roles of *axia* in Aristotle and *dignitas* in Cicero.

For Aristotle, different political constitutions can be defined in terms of their ‘axiomatic’ preferences, or of what for them counts as dignity. For a democracy it is simply free birth; for an oligarchy possession of wealth; for an aristocracy possession of virtue.¹⁷

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.iii, 7-8.

At times it would seem that Aristotle understands virtue in terms of the flourishing of an individual who attains an inner balance of the emotions and between emotions and reason. If he needs friends it is to amend his loneliness and to enjoy utility, companionship and agreement concerning the good. Yet this seeming individualism is massively qualified by Aristotle's statement that complete virtue involves also the virtuous treatment of others for their own sakes, with the stated implication that entire virtue is 'justice' in a more general sense than 'specific justice' which is concerned with the distribution and exchange of inherently incommensurable resources.¹⁸ So whereas virtue as individual might suggest the altogether reserved dignity of the man following 'the mean' and exercising a restrained magnanimity whose aim is to escape dependence by sustaining other in such a condition, virtue as justice implies rather a virtue that is necessarily outgoing.

This understanding of virtue as outgoing *axia* or dignity can be textually confirmed in three ways. First, Aristotle defines *axia* not as a lonely principle but as something on which other truths and goods depend and to which it gives rise: it is 'a term of relation: It denotes having a claim to goods external to oneself' and supremely to the best mode of tribute, which is honour.¹⁹ Secondly, as Robert L. Gallagher argues in a remarkable recent essay, Aristotle actually calls into question virtue as an axiomatic standard if by that we understand an inert, already achieved status. Aristotle no more accords to that any political or economic worth than he does to the given achievement of birth or of income.²⁰ Instead, he understands specifically political virtue as an

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V. ii 6 – 10.

¹⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, 11, 10.

²⁰ Robert L. Gallagher, 'Incommensurability in Aristotle's Theory of Reciprocal Justice' in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20 (4), 667-701. But I implicitly dissent below from some of the

ergon, or as the exercise of a function or role – socially speaking a *leitourgia* which the Latins translated as *officium*. This combination of the ontological with the pragmatic is, as Gallagher points out, typical of Aristotle’s philosophy as a whole: thus for him a blinded eye is no longer properly an eye at all, as it lacks either the *energeia* or *dynamis*, the actuality or potential of sight.²¹ Therefore in asking about the good of humanity as such, which teleologically defines the human as human, Aristotle asks what is the specific *ergon* of human beings and answers that it is ‘the active exercise of the soul’s faculties’.²² In the third place, as Gallagher also points out, in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle includes justice within friendship rather than the other way about: ‘the whole of justice is in relation to a friend, for what is just is just for certain persons, and persons who are partners, and a friend is a partner, either in one’s family or in one’s life’.²³

So for Aristotle it is not just that justice trumps personal virtue and so politics ethics, but also and almost inversely, justice turns out to be always to do with a series of specific ‘civic friendships’ of many variously appropriate kinds and the *polis* to be the open totality of the asymmetric reciprocities between incommensurable goods and persons that composes specific justice. It is as if the private gives way to the public but then the public itself restores the intimate – but now as relational and mutual rather than self-enclosed. It follows that if specific justice concerns economic and legal contracts it is answerable to a more general justice which is for Aristotle none other than the life of paradoxically ‘obligatory’ generosity and graciousness where public statues of the three graces remind every citizen always to return favours with

details of his analysis concerning the diagonal, which seem to me superfluously complex. This observation does not in any detract from the great significance of this essay.

²¹ See, for example, Aristotle, *Meteorologia*, 390, 10.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, vii, 14.

²³ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, VII, x, 5.

interest and to themselves offer endlessly new favours which establish new reciprocal obligations.²⁴

In these ways we can see how in Aristotle, as in Plato, an originally ‘manly’ virtue of martial or philosophical restraint gives way to a more relational understanding of virtue as work, justice, gift and mutual dependency. Indeed one could argue that for this reason virtue has become more fundamentally a matter of honour (as Aquinas later affirms) since any social good must not only be done but must be seen to be done – be recognised²⁵

We can therefore conclude that that for Aristotle dignity is not something inert and altogether reserved. It much more consists in the operations of exchange through work and gift. In this way a mutual according of dignity is like a kind of gift-exchange of dignity itself as a property. Here one should remember that for Aristotle ‘character’ (*ethos*) stands at the intersection of innate ability, habitual development of those abilities and social role that is accorded from without. Also one should note that generosity shares with dignity the paradoxical need to reserve itself in giving itself, both in order that there can be further giving in the future and in order that magnanimity does not turn into foolish and undignified lavishness, bestowing too much on all and on unworthy as much as worthy recipients.²⁶

As exchanged, *axia* is *doxa*, dignity is honour. The exchange of honour turns out to be crucial to Aristotle’s understanding of economic justice, as Gallagher also points out.

Every exchange between incommensurable goods and roles, like that between a

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V, v, 6-7.

²⁵ ST II.II. q. 145 a. 1 ad 2.

²⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV in general.

shoemaker and a housebuilder, to give Aristotle's own prime example, involves an unmeasurable exchange which is nevertheless a proportion in the sense that a diagonal is visibly proportional to the sides of square, even though this proportion cannot be 'rationally' expressed in finite terms by mathematics.²⁷ This crucial invocation shows that for Aristotle such a 'diagonal' *analogon* or proportion is metaphysically real even though inexpressible, just as irrational numbers really enter into the composition of geometric space. It is important here to realise that in the legacy of Pythagorean/Platonic mathematics which Aristotle inherited, this ir-rational or *alogon* dimension did not fully belong on the line of real numbers as for modern mathematics which admits it in terms of an after-all measurable calculus of approximation, but rather represented a more ineffably and unreachably ideal element mediating between number and higher and concealed eidetic structures of the cosmos.²⁸ To this dimension our economic judgements as to just exchange, somehow measuring the incommensurable, enjoy a certain limited and yet genuine access.

For this reason the impossible measure can be but imperfectly carried out by money, which tends to flatten every comparison onto a continuous arithmetic scale, lacking the geometric comparison of ratios (such as shoemaker/shoe compared with housebuilder/house that is diagonalised in incommensurate exchange as shoemaker/house compared with housebuilder/shoe) and the intrusion of the incommensurable diagonal. Money tends to compress both need and labour into a scale of degrees of homonymity, whereas in reality both want and work remain of

²⁷ *NE*, V, iv, 2-8.

²⁸ See Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origins of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann (New York, Dover, 1968) and David Lachtermann, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1989).

incomparably different kinds.²⁹ By ignoring this reality, a genuine exchange of diverse needs and tasks is abandoned in favour of the mercantile rule of supply and demand, which for Aristotle merely accords power to the strong and to existing status taken outside the context of status-as-function which operates in terms of a diagonal exchange. To ensure the justice of the latter, generosity must continuously interfere with the pecuniary dictates of pre-established status (whether of birth, wealth or already reputed virtue) to guarantee prices and wages that enable the sustained *existence and flourishing* of the party that one is trading with.³⁰

In the case of an exchange between parties of higher and lower status, as for example an architect and a shoemaker, Aristotle argues in the *Eudemian Ethics* that the higher-status party (according to virtue, since architecture is a more variously demanding and paradigmatically more architectonic role, commanding the labour of others) will always tend to enforce a greater contribution from the lesser and weaker party, while the lesser party will always seek to gain a disproportionate benefit or ‘profit’ (which for Aristotle always denotes an excessive share in any transaction) from the deal in question. Aristotle’s solution here is to allow the latter imbalance to pertain, but to compensate this in terms of a greater ‘honouring’ of the higher party by both the beneficiary and the public at large.³¹

This somewhat astounding passage therefore reveals that Aristotle does not trust the power even of established virtue, unless this virtue justly extends itself in a generosity

²⁹ *NE* V, v, 14-15; Gallagher, ‘Incommensurability’.

³⁰ *EE* VII, xi, 6: ‘for the superior friend and benefactor wishes existence to belong to his own work and to him who gave one existence it is one’s duty to give existence in return’.

³¹ *EE*, VII, x, 10-13.

prepared always to raise the relatively poor in material terms and to endlessly reconstrue its own prestige in terms of a relatively immaterial honour.

This instance gives the lie to nearly all our current liberal political and economic assumptions. For it shows that to construe dignity as hierarchical status is not to confirm the status quo, but rather to constantly define, redefine and modify relative status within the terms of social and economic exchange itself. Inversely, to think of dignity as the universal right of every human being as such, regardless of role and status, must paradoxically ensure that fixed, given status triumphs after all. For if mere free market supply and demand rules, then pre-existing relative powers of wealth will be confirmed and not qualified, as Aristotle requires. In this way right as dignity deconstructs into an oligarchic axiomatisation or ‘dignifying’ of mere monetary value and the cash nexus.

As Gallagher argues, Aristotle’s reasoning shows that if one begins by *admitting* the real social situation of difference and inequality (and still today we give architects far more prestige than shoemakers etc) then one can seek to qualify this through an ethos that honours material benefactors -- systematically in every exchange and not as a kind of American multi-billionaire’s compensation for past iniquities of effectively coerced exchanging. But if instead one pretends an equality that must remain a mere formal fiction, then the real inequalities which always prevail will thereby be intensified, as the recent history of neoliberal dominance so amply testifies. Thus in a world that theoretically rejects hierarchy we see the ever-growing dominance of brutal hierarchies within corporations and of corporate and individual wealth over those relatively poorer. These hierarchies are supposed to be the accidental results of ‘fair’

competition, but such ‘fairness’ in truth results from an unjust leaving of people’s justifiable needs to chance outcomes, which ensures that people are constantly defeated and indebted in the struggle to survive. Equivalently, the hierarchies that result from this struggle are hierarchies in which power and prestige goes unjustified by any sense of honour or social responsibility.

By comparison, Aristotle proposed that society, since it has a need, for example, of shoemakers, has a duty to ensure that reliable shoemakers can afford adequate housing and cannot leave this to the vagaries of a neutral or amoral marketplace, such that only rich or gazumping and monopolising shoemakers may be able to pay their mortgages. But the sustaining and enforcing of such a sense of duty requires the idea that existing elites of every kind and degree be defined not just in terms of an expectation of virtue, but also in terms of an expectation of honourable generosity and self-sacrifice. Otherwise, Aristotle rightly reasons, there can be no practice of justice. Human dignity as unequal and differential status paradoxically *promotes* human equalisation, as Gallagher concludes his article, whereas liberal dignity as equal right has just the opposite effect

We can also see how in the case of Aristotle the reserved and expressive aspects of dignity are held together in terms of the idea of the exercise of a social role (*leitourgia*) and performance of a social work (*ergon*) as the exercise of a measured generosity in which the element of restraint both conserves justice within reciprocity and ensures the retention of a reserve of capacity for future giving and relating. The context for this integral understanding of *axia* or dignity is therefore the constitution of *diakosounē* (justice) within the *polis*. It is the city which integrates external

dignities of performed offices to form a functioning whole. However, this functionalism is qualified by the circumstance that the just city is itself defined as the open-ended sequence of personal relationships.³² To the degree that justice is constituted by friendships, the interior and personal aspect of dignity is not here ignored. For the diagonal exchanges are not just of incommensurable works but also of incommensurable persons identified with their roles as *erga*. Exchanges therefore not just of actual products but also of potential subjective capacity – as when one has a standing contract with a shoemaker, tailor or building firm.

It can, however be argued that the Aristotelian integration of invisible with visible dignity remained imperfect. This concerns an unresolved tension between virtue and justice, *aretē* and *diakosounē*. The aim of the best, aristocratic polity, according to Aristotle, is to produce virtue in its citizens. Yet virtue is defined by Aristotle, as already mentioned, in terms of an internal psychic balance of functions. Compared to Plato in the *Republic* he construes the operation of *phronesis* in these terms, thereby confining justice in the individual and in the city to the idea of ‘the division of labour’ or the proper remaining of both psychic functions and social roles in their ‘proper’ social places. Yet in the *Republic* Plato at once endorses and criticises this notion of justice as insufficient: for if the highest function of reason (*nous*) in the soul or of rule in the city (the dignified *axia* or principle, in either case) is understood merely in terms of its highest rank within an immanent order (whether soul, city or cosmos) then its authority could be reduced, as the sophists in this dialogue insinuate, to that of a superior more subtle *force* commanding the more brutal and manifest power of honourable *thumos* which restrains the desires of the soul, just as the military restrains

³² *EE*, VII, x, 5-20; *NE* Books VIII – IX.

the working classes in the city, according to Plato's 'tripartite' psychopolitics. Reason and rule are for Plato not so reducible because he considers that they are themselves answerable to their participation in a transcendent goodness. This participation is practically witnessed by an exercise of *phronesis* which assesses the right times and places for certain appropriate actions. Hence the operation of *phronesis* in Plato escapes the framework of a fixed hierarchic space in favour of time and a more fluid geography in a way that it does not in Aristotle. By the same token, participation in the Good for Plato exceeds justice in terms of the constant formation of human relationships or friendships.³³

We have already seen how Aristotle still invokes the same exceeding in the city context, but he is less able than Plato to relate this exceeding also to psychic virtue and to cosmic relationships. This is because Plato held to a more seamless metaphysic: for him practical wisdom is identical with the theoretical contemplation of transcendent goodness and hence the goodness of the soul is already relational. We are good insofar as we relate to the divine and we participate in the divine by communicating this goodness as adult men not just to other adult humans (as for Aristotle) but also to women, children and animals. Hence for Plato the ethical as the *ethos* of friendship embraces the whole of reality and we can be friends with gods, children and animals – thereby ensuring that dignity as status can 'ecologically' extend to non-human natural realities. But for Aristotle the ethical is a purely human and political affair: in consequence true friendship only pertains between adult male participants in the political process.

³³ Plato, *Republic*, *passim*; Zdravko Planinc, *Plato's Political Philosophy: Prudence in the Republic and the Laws* (London, Duckworth, 1991); Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: the Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids Mich, Eerdmans, 2012), 5-112.

A further consequence is that there can be, after all, no perfect integration of dignity as virtue and dignity as justice. For if the purpose of the polity is to produce virtue, then this refers ultimately to an inward prudential integration within the individual. It is surely just for this reason that Aristotle thinks that even the virtuous person may seek to exploit his very dignity of possession of virtue (though his would seem to contradict his very virtue) as the passage in *Eudemian Ethics* has revealed to us. Here it seems, personal virtue must be *qualified* by civic justice if it is to be virtue in a fuller sense.

Just the same tension is revealed by the fact that this text sees practical political activity as the highest human end, whereas the *Nicomachean Ethics* understand it to be theoretical contemplation. The latter is then the *acme* of personal virtue and yet it does not lie within the ethical.

On the other hand, if this *acme* lies, as for the *Eudemian Ethics*, within the scope of our contribution to justice, does it truly remain personal virtue? In the case of the latter, we have seen the danger that Aristotle as opposed to Plato's account of *phronesis* could reduce to a sophistic understanding of justice as self-preservation and the smooth functioning of individual strength, because of the lack of reference to transcendent Goodness. But the same lack of reference threatens an equivalent reduction of the idea of justice in the city to the notion of the smoothest functioning city, the best adapted to preserve itself and withstand external enemies. This is all the more the case because of Aristotle's (and Plato's, though not all later Platonism) lack of consideration of any international political order. In that case *arête* would *reduce* to *ergon*, virtue to role and reserved dignity to expressed dignity.

Such a reduction might seem to be suggested by Aristotle's declaration that the foundation of any political order is the inability of the lone individual to supply all his diverse needs. Hence the *polis* is founded on the economic diagonal of proportionate reciprocity between incommensurables. However, Aristotle qualifies any taint of utilitarian contractualism in this conception by insisting that all reciprocity is suffused by our spiritual need for friendship.

Yet friendship itself can be for utility, pleasure or shared delight in the truth.³⁴ Only in the third respect does it entirely escape the taint of mere instrumentality or convenience. But agreement in the truth splits into agreement concerning either theoretical or practical truth. If the former, then relationality and friendship gives way towards the self-sufficiency of lone contemplation – in accord with the *aporia* of knowledge and friendship already sketched out by Plato in the *Lysis* (one should only be friends with the wise, but wisdom is self-sufficient and needs no companions).³⁵ But if the latter, then this must be agreement concerning the operation of this justice in the city. In order for this agreement not to be tautologous, justice must exceed friendship as the mere holding together of the city in strength, with friendship reduced to reciprocal functionality. The only way to save a self-reference of friendship purely to friendship as a truth without tautology is the Platonic route of allowing that human friendship participates in the higher friendship of the gods to us and with each other. Ultimately, the Platonic *aporia* is most satisfactorily resolved in Christian terms where knowledge is itself defined as relational love and even God himself is possesses wisdom through the interrelationship of the Trinitarian persons.

³⁴ *EE* VIII, X, 17.

³⁵ See Samuel Kimbriel's unpublished Cambridge Doctoral Dissertation, 'Friendship as Sacred Knowing'.

The Platonic city itself participates in the community of the Platonic Forms, just as the Christian polity or *ecclesia* later relates to and participates in angelic community and the *koinonia* of the Trinitarian life itself. But the Aristotelian city does not relate beyond itself either horizontally or vertically. Hence the open-ended network of reciprocities which compose it after all meets a totalising closure at the city walls. The external and expressive dignity of the exercised *ergon* therefore leaves behind the personal reserve of virtue in the name of manifest justice.

If we turn from Aristotle to Cicero, then we discover that the aporetic split between inner and outer dignity (virtue and justice) has been considerably magnified. This is primarily because the context for their relative and provisional integration – the city-state – had been compromised by the transition in Rome from Republic to Empire and the gradual decline of civic virtue, which Cicero laments. This resulted in a double compensatory movement: on the one-hand towards a ‘proto-modern’ founding of order upon the individual subject and on the other towards a new sense of ‘cosmopolitan’ order appealing beyond legality to the laws of nature and to shared human customs and reciprocities that had never been confined by the merely political. In terms of the notion of *axia* or *dignitas* one can read this as a ‘post-political’ division between a sheerly inward principle of reserve and a radically exteriorised principle in which ‘polity’ is newly extended to coincide with cosmos.

Stoicism was the philosophy which articulated this split: dividing the ethical between an apathetic indifference of the individual on the one hand, and a dutiful submission to the public demands of *leitourgia* or *officium* on the other. In either case the loss of

teleology which requires reference to a transcendent good, and which we have seen is already latent (surprisingly enough) in Aristotle is fully realised: there is no ‘aim’ of either self or city, since both are immanently self-sufficient.

Cicero’s *De Officiis* is suffused with this Stoic division of dignity, and yet it is by no means a purely Stoic text. Indeed it is the most extraordinary work which repays detailed study just because it can be seen as a kind of condensed microhistory of our entire western ethical development from antiquity to the present. It faithfully preserves just as much as it uncannily anticipates.

For this one Latin text first, as it claims, sustains the Academic and Peripatetic (Platonic and Aristotelian) tradition which it regards as one, while giving it a ‘new academic’ semi-sceptical gloss; secondly anticipates somewhat the centrality of dignity as *persona* in Christian thought; thirdly, overlays the Academic-Peripatetic account of virtue with Stoic considerations and fourthly, in terms of a Stoic split between invisible and visible dignity foreshadows the modern split between deontological and utilitarian ethics. The text has proto-modern and proto-liberal features without ever quite getting there.

Inversely, one can say that much of the apparently modern ‘liberalism’ of the 18th C was really not yet modern – not yet clearly about abstract rights and materialist utility – but rather distinctly and avowedly Ciceronian. In this respect one can say that the pre-Christian had now bizarrely become post-Christian – opening the way in the 19th C to the return of a fully-fledged ancient sophistry in a new secular guise. This sophistry of rights and utility emerges precisely through the gap between inner and

outer dignity that neo-Ciceronianism allowed to re-emerge in its abandonment of the Platonic and Christian healing of this rift.

In the case of Cicero's *De Officiis*, we are confronted by a kind of slippery sliding scale that extends from fully reserved to fully manifest dignity. At the inward end of the scale the highest *dignitas* is the exercise of reason and reason as genuine wisdom dictates that a man (*sic*) be entirely self-sufficient and totally immune to passion.³⁶

But such wisdom fully coincides with the *utile* or 'expedient' because it unites a man with all the vagaries of cosmic fate. Cicero here explicitly notes that Academic-Peripatetic notions of the good did not so exactly coincide with the expedient, because they might sometimes require the latter to be sacrificed for the sake of psychic coincidence with a spiritual good transcending the material cosmos (it is relevant here that for the Stoics the soul and all its motions were also material).³⁷

However, Cicero explains that the entirety of the *De Officiis* is concerned with a lesser wisdom of practical involvement.³⁸ In that sense the dignity of office which he discusses would seem to be a dignity of *decus* or of outward fittingness. However, here the sliding scale intrudes. For exterior public *decorum* is to be guided by a relatively inward *honestum*, even though this term itself has etymological connotations of an outwardly facing 'honour' (as Aquinas later emphasises)³⁹ as compared with the pure reserve of genuine wisdom. *Honestum* is something like a severe adherence to duty, whereas *decorum* is something like 'ethical style', the artistry of life. Unlike Kant, Cicero insists that a certain aesthetic will always

³⁶ Cicero, *On Duties (De Officiis)*, I, iv, 14; x, 57; xxx, 107; xxxvi, 131; III, iii, 12-15.

³⁷ Cicero, *On Duties*, III, iv, 20. See also *De Legibus*, I, vii, 22.

³⁸ *On Duties*, III, iv, 15-16.

³⁹ S.T. II. II. q. 145 a. 1; a. 3 resp.

accompany the moral act, even though he also declares that there can be no style without substance and that *decorum* is always produced by *honestum*.⁴⁰ The only non-moral and undignified yet valid style is the *venustas*, ‘loveliness’ or ‘charm’ which he ascribes to the beauty of women, as opposed to the dignified or sublime and elevated masculine aesthetic.⁴¹

It is important to pause here and pay attention to the inherently *gendered* character of all discourse about dignity. Dignity has always been coded as male. Even if women can validly, for the tradition, possess dignity, as so often trans-gendering is allowed only a one-way validity because the feminine is considered to be ‘lesser’. Thus women may be elevated, but men should not be degraded: for Cicero men cannot be charming without being basely effeminate.

However, this asymmetry also self-deconstructs in an interesting way. Cicero identifies the highest masculinity as the interior dignity of the Stoic sage; he identifies allowable femininity as an exterior so playfully superficial that it exceeds the sway of dignity altogether. Yet while men cannot as real men enter this sphere, every emergence from the reserve of wisdom, every politically crucial step from *honestum* to *decorum* and then, as we shall see to the *utile* or convenient, involves after all a certain cross-dressing, a certain ‘chivalric’ (one might anachronistically say) concession to feminine charm, without which men could not relate to women at all and the human race could not be preserved.

⁴⁰ *On Duties*, I, xxvii, 93-97.

⁴¹ *On Duties*, I, xxxvi, 130.

Particularly the step towards the *utile* consummates this approach. For beyond the style of the honourable ethical action, the *utile* concerns the whole style and convenience of every aspect of cultural life from meals and manners to buildings and ornaments.⁴² Precisely the sphere outside both battlefield and kitchen where the sexes together congregate. Surely the *utile* is most proximate to the *venustas*?

So if dignity as inward and reserved is coded masculine, dignity as expressive and ‘glorious’ implicitly approaches in its coding the feminine, like the *Shekinah* or ‘glory of the Lord’ in the Hebrew scriptures. Masculine ‘honour’ which steps forth from dignity is always in consequence a kind of delicate and often indirect and roundabout (involving wars, quests, conquests, expeditions etc) approach towards women.

Yet is this for the tradition always a diversion, seduction and weakening of the masculine? *De Officiis* exhibits by implication a remarkable ambivalence concerning just this issue, an ambivalence which coincides with the central ambivalence of the whole text. Cicero claims that the highest virtue is in accord with wisdom, which would dictate Stoic reserve and dispassion. However, like Aristotle in the *Eudemean Ethics* he insists that the highest virtue does not lie in contemplation but in doing good to others through civic involvement.⁴³ He only resolves this contradiction through a logical subterfuge which declares that wisdom contemplates the unity and harmony of the cosmos and so points to the priority of the social and relational.⁴⁴ Yet clearly, for the Stoic view, identity with cosmic unity is achieved through passive resignation and

⁴² *On Duties*, Books II and III.

⁴³ *On Duties*, I, xliii, 155.

⁴⁴ *On Duties*, I, xliii, 153.

not through practical action. In affirming the priority of the latter, Cicero is also forced to elevate natural impulse and cultural tradition above the dictates of reason.

In this way, his entire discourse is thrown into reverse: it would seem that the apparent descent from the dignity of reason is really a destined expansion into the dignity of style and utility which points to the exceeding of dignity for the sake of wooing the unrestrained beauty of feminine charm and delight. Thus we are directed away from the dignity of the soul, down the winding passages of an increasingly festive city and out through its gates into the embrace of the *cosmopolis*. After all, the very word *cosmos* implies that the whole is but a superfluous charm, an ornament.

The same ambivalence concerning inward and outward dignity (self-collapsing towards charm) allows a certain opening towards modern ethical duality. For Cicero already begins to suppress teleology in favour of a contrast between duty (*officium*) and utility (*utile*). This arises because for him a perfect coincidence of duty with outcome is only achieved by the attitude of inward resignation precisely because of its *indifference* towards outcome. To take this stance is implicitly to reject Plato and Aristotle's teleological notion that virtues are habits which tend of themselves to certain outcomes rather than others – and which we may sometimes be forced to follow rather than merely expedient ('utilitarian') outcomes. But despite this implicit rejection, Cicero continues in a traditional way to insist that no genuine *decorum* and even no genuine *utile* can be independent of *honestum*.⁴⁵ However, he always protests too much, because he is uneasily aware that he has secured this coincidence only through an absolutisation of duty and wisdom with indifference towards teleological

⁴⁵ *On Duties*, III, viii, 35.

goal. It follows in logical consequence that every goal, every utility and every expediency *has* in some degree escaped the sway of wisdom and dutiful morality. So Cicero with near contradiction keeps saying that certain inclining degrees on his sliding scale from dignity to charm – first *decorum* and then *utile* – are ‘outside’ the ethical and yet are after all within it.

And at the level of the *utile* he reverses the justification for this inclusion. It is no longer the case that psychic reserve constrains the stylistic and comfortable into authenticity, but rather that whatever is beautiful, harmonious and useful fits into the cosmic whole and reinforces its totalised goodness.⁴⁶ At this point an affirmed height of ‘deontology’ is deconstructed into an equally affirmed depth of ‘utilitarianism’. Even if these terms are anachronistic, their significance is already latent, since we have located their ultimate premodern genealogical roots.

If that is the case, then modernity remains, by implication, caught up in the sophistic crisis of the classical world, or rather has reawakened that crisis by ‘sophisticatedly’ and perversely ignoring the positively sophisticated and truly subtle resolution of that crisis by first Platonism and then, more adequately, Christianity. This resolution concerned an adequate mediation between inward and outward dignity.

We have already seen how Cicero half-undid the partial mediation achieved by Aristotle’s account of reciprocal justice in the city. Effectively he either divorced virtue from work or *ergon*, or alternatively rendered it only external work as cosmic *officium*. While, therefore his proclamation of the *dignitas* of man (*sic*) as such is an

⁴⁶ *On Duties*, III, iii, 13; v, 21-26; vi, 26-28.

advance over Aristotle insofar as this allows him to begin to envisage the achievement of virtue by all whatever their roles and the duty of sympathy with man as such, this comes at the price of an abstraction which in the long term will lead to empty liberal formalism and the consequent *de-ethicisation* of actual function, according to the pattern already described.

4. The Christian Mediation between Interior and Exterior Dignity, Dignity and Grace

Is it possible to affirm the dignity of human beings in universal and yet effectively concrete terms and thereby to hold together absolute invisible value with specific visible valuation?

In order to do so one must ensure that citizenry of the *cosmopolis* is not plausibly given simply by natural birth outside cultural and political relation. In doing so, Cicero already threatened to make subjective right the foundation of political order. Just like Aristotle he allowed that there were pre-political communities involving justice and friendship. He agreed with the Greek philosopher that the basis of these communities lay in the needs of human being not just to fulfil their material needs but also to enjoy friendship. However, unlike Aristotle he declared (no doubt in conditions of increasing international anarchy) that the specific reason for the founding of *city-states* was the securing of private property.⁴⁷ In his insistence on the absoluteness of the latter (later criticised by St Augustine), the general wrongness of

⁴⁷ *On Duties*, II, xxi, 73. xxii, 78;

theft even in dire need, and even from foreigners, and the non-commutability of debts (thereby treating negative sums, in contrast to Pythagorean tradition, sustained by Plato and Aristotle and paralleled by the Hebrew Bible, as if they were just as real as positive ones) Cicero comes across as proto-liberal and proto-capitalist.⁴⁸ His internationalism is already predicated upon a ‘respect for person and property’ that begins to equate the two. In this instance the practical translation of the deontological axis of his political thought, as later in the end with Kant, is the sacralisation of private ownership. Sacralisation, because political duty now refers to property as axiomatic *principium* instead of according property on just and principled lines as granted on certain conditions and in relation to the performance of certain responsibilities.

In this way the ethical character in Cicero seems to cede sway to the givenness of the mere individual and his ‘own’. Nevertheless, Christian theology was able to adopt and borrow from Cicero (amongst other sources) his understanding of character as *persona*. As for Aristotle, Cicero sees ‘personhood’ as arising in part from universal human nature, in part from natural aptitudes, in part from accorded social role and in part from habitual personal effort.⁴⁹

In this respect *persona* in Cicero would seem to mediate between invisible and visible in a way that *dignitas* fails to do. It is therefore fascinating to realise that in some medieval texts these two terms become practically synonymous.⁵⁰ This implies that now ‘axiomatic’ value had been accorded to personhood. This is something quite different from the Ciceronian and modern liberal according of dignity to the rational

⁴⁸ *On Duties*, II, xxiv, 94; III, vi, 28-31;

⁴⁹ *On Duties*, I, xxx, 107; xxxii, 115.

⁵⁰ See Lebech, ‘What is Human Dignity?’

human individual. For it presupposes a merging of universal natural birth with cultural and political birth. And for this in turn to have become possible there had to emerge a political society that understood itself from the outset and intrinsically as cosmopolitan. For then universal citizenry ceases to be merely formal and abstract, without thereby sinking back into the atavistically particular.

This new universal polity was, of course, the *ecclesia*, the Church: a city without earthly walls in which, in consequence, the network of friendship (agapeic-erotic) is truly open-ended and indeed infinite, even though membership is constituted by an always specific if dynamic and fluctuating (both horizontally and vertically) emplacement. Thus St. Ambrose was able to re-write and qualify Cicero's *De Officiis* in newly ecclesiastical terms.⁵¹

In consequence, citizenry is now personhood and personhood citizenry: at once cosmic, social and mystical-liturgical. The dignified status of human existence as such has become 'personal' because we play the role, wear the mask (the original meaning of *persona*) of God, who is himself personal and in whose image we are created. Thus Aquinas sustains the close new association of *dignitas* with *persona*, and mediates the notion of dignity by treating the category of *persona* as itself something that analogically shifts between natural and social status – in a way that may seem slightly shocking to modern sensibilities. He declares that *persona* originally meant the mask of high-ranking persons in classical plays, then was transferred to mean high-ranking dignitaries in the Church and was finally applied to the high role played by all human beings as such. That this exalted status is nevertheless an assumed role is guaranteed

⁵¹ See Mark Jordan, 'Cicero, Ambrose and Aquinas "On Duties", or the Limits of Genre in Morals' in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol 3, No. 3, Sept 2005, 485-502.

by the fact that Aquinas thinks we may legitimately kill those who have effectively surrendered their humanity.⁵² As for Aristotle the ontological remains pragmatic: if we no longer perform human works, then we literally *are not* or are only vestigially human, at least as far the other human eye can discern.

Just because *persona* is a term that thereby shifts in its meaning and denotes a role whose performance is essential to the highest excellence as we know it, Aquinas thinks that it can be analogically extended to God, as in Trinitarian discourse. In this way personhood has been identified by him with the highest sublimity, dignity and *principium* of all.

So whereas liberal thought seeks to guarantee universality by reaching for a universal status behind any performed role, Aquinas prefers to run with original etymology by conceiving a universal and cosmic drama where the authentic remains the merely assumed. Even God is originally and exhaustively manifest in his interiority as a glorious interplay of a masked triplicity.

In his further understanding of *persona*, Aquinas blended Boethian ‘rational substance’ with Porretan and Victorine ‘incommunicability’. But the two aspects tend to come together under the aspect of dignity: *hypostasis proprietate distincta ad dignitatem pertinent*.⁵³ A person is someone who possesses elevated or dignified properties, such as reason, but in unique and diversified ways. Indeed, Cicero had already to a remarkable and almost Kierkegaardian degree insisted that one can only be ethical ‘in one’s own character’ and not by trying to be someone else. Precisely

⁵² ST I, q. 29 a. 3 ad 3 and aa 1-3; II.II q. 64 a.2 ad 3; q. 102 aa 1-3.

⁵³ ST. I. q. 29 a.3 ad 2.

like Kierkegaard he even defined the ethical goal as achieving ‘consistency’ (*constantia* and *equabilitas*) of character and thereby performing a stable social role.⁵⁴ This, for him, was the crucial heart of a decorous deployment of the convenient and of an honourable guiding of the decorous. To act consistently, therefore, was to possess social dignity. Aquinas now equates this with being a human person as such, since being a ‘character’ in relation to God trumps inwardness and even God is inwardly turned towards an interpersonal performance.

However, relationship to God as constitutive of the human person can seem to betoken another mode of refusal of outward dignity. If we are to honour humans as being in the image of God, then surely we are never honouring human beings as such, only God through human beings and maybe through their most interior aspect of reason. Protestant Christianity has often expressed this sort of idea. But Aquinas refuses it: just as sign to be a sign must also be something in itself, so also an image to be an image must be a reality in its own right. So if human beings are fit to be in the image of God, then they can be accorded honour for a dignity that they possess in a certain sense as properly their own.⁵⁵

The logic of the image, which we must first ‘stay with’ in order to ‘pass through’, therefore tends to integrate invisible and visible dignity. This suggests that without the notion of the *imago dei*, such integration, with respect to dignity-talk, may be impossible for secularity to sustain. Moreover, the notion of iconicity that is here involved tends to disallow the disjunction of inward reason from outer corporeality through which character shines forth: each person in their face and body radiates a

⁵⁴ *On Duties*, I, xxxi, 110-115.

⁵⁵ ST. II.II. q. 101, a.3 ad 3.

scintilla of the divine wisdom. Here a material presentation is valued as mediating a spiritual reality, while spirituality is only recognised along a specific visual trajectory or perspective.

In concrete terms this means that a messy, suffering, human body can be in an evil-suffused world the most potent witness to human dignity. Or the dignity with pathos of the innocent, wondering, receptive child. (It is extraordinary that Michael Rosen thinks that children do not possess dignity when their unselfconsciousness ensures they can possess it far more naturally than can adults.)⁵⁶

The same personalist and iconic understanding of dignity implies that a person can remain fully dignified even when she performs a task assigned to her by another, or even if she is forced to do something against her will. For in the first case she can act as a 'representative' which runs with and not against the drift of 'personhood', while in the second place she can bear representative witness through suffering to either the justice of her punishment or the inequity of her oppression.

This sense of personhood and dignity as the performing of a role, whether cosmic or cultural, lies at the heart of Pico della Mirandola's treatise that was posthumously entitled *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.⁵⁷ It is wholly erroneous to imagine that this work pre-announces a modern liberal constructivism, because its entire *topos* and conclusions are all anticipated in writings of the Church Fathers. Humanity is a *Proteus*: lacking any specific attribute of his own, his specificity is paradoxically to combine in himself, at the centre of the cosmos, the material, animate and spiritual,

⁵⁶ Rosen, *Dignity*, 77.

⁵⁷ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* trans. Francesco Borghesis et al (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012).

along with the ruling, knowing and loving functions of the three angelic orders of the Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim. Between all these attributes he is free to choose. This is in part indeed a matter of creative construction with respect to the operation of natural magic, but herein our co-creation with God is as much a matter of discovery as invention, as we both shape and release hidden natural powers. This ‘Renaissance’ dimension of Pico’s work is itself unfolded in wholly orthodox Catholic terms, but at the heart of human choice lies for him a more traditional selection of our destiny amongst pre-given locations. Our real dignity is our capacity to elect to be united in the love of the Cherubim to God. And while this is our highest destiny, it can in reality only be granted to us by God as an act of grace.

So for Pico human dignity lies finally in the divinely gracious gift. Dignity is something that we are granted, that we have borrowed. Since we do not possess dignity in ourselves or because of any inalienable property, it would seem questionable, for this outlook, to locate dignity in the conception of a human being as ‘an end in itself’ as does Kant. By contrast, for Christian tradition, human beings as divine images are more fundamentally means for other human beings to pass with them but also through them to God; nor are we ends to ourselves but rather destined for the contemplation of God, while the human race as a whole is a means first to display and then to restore the divine glory. Christianity agrees with Nietzsche (who was but distorting theological *topoi*) that humanity is ‘a great bridge’.

As in the case of right divorced from status, it can seem that the Kantian conception is far more likely to secure human dignity than any notion which confines human beings to means, in however refined a way. Is not Kant ensuring that human beings can never

be treated as commodities or instruments? But to the contrary, the idea of the human being as in himself a dignified *principium*, a first and final reality, is merely the reverse aspect of the reduction of everything, including human beings *qua* workers, to commodity-status. For the fungibility of *everything else* requires indeed that the owning subject be absolutely non-fungible, non-exchangeable, entirely free for the mere sake of freedom, in order that his property-owning be freed of every condition, however honourable. The human subject who can never be treated as a means to an end that exceeds him is a subject that transcends all shared social purpose, but a subject that *qua* occupier of a social office can be (along with the commodified material earth) *all the more exploited* if ethics cannot be concerned with the discrimination of appropriate and inappropriate mediations which human beings can perform and be subject to.

To 'use' other human beings can sound odious to hypocritical non-reflection – since we do it and have to do it all the time. But actually, to treat oneself or another human being as an 'end', as the goal of an endeavour, is much more sinisterly objectifying. For an end is an objective full-stop, without any personal characteristics -- unless one is the infinite God -- since these can only be displayed in dramatic and narrative terms which always involve still being on the way somewhere and still being a means to that end, employing other means. To see oneself or someone else as an end is to turn a person into a conclusion that is defined by the sublimely blank pages that follow it. Hence it is to seek to arrive at the ultimate, but ultimately empty capacity of the person for freedom in general as if this could function as an ultimate terminus. As the essence of subjectivity, this emptiness ensures that it dialectically coincides with 'objectivity' in the sense of a meaningless material thing that can be endlessly

manipulated, just as absolute property owner and entirely alienable property are mutually co-established.

By contrast, from the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, Pico and Aquinas we have seen how dignity conceived as transitory role strangely guarantees just distribution much better than dignity conceived of as an inalienably static property of possession.

Moreover, the granting of dignity by grace suggests a final intensification of my interior versus exterior thematic.

For not only does this play out within dignity, it also plays in the contrast of dignity with grace. We have already seen this in the case of Cicero, since Friedrich Schiller in the late 18th C validly translated *venustas* as *Anmut* or ‘grace’.⁵⁸ Even though both authors meant this in the aesthetic sense, the New Testament use of terms denoting grace involved a borrowing of the Hellenic term *charis* originally suggesting the divine bestowing of a supernatural, fantastic, aerial mode of beauty. And it is inaccurate to suggest that the New Testament and the Church Fathers abandoned rather than transfigured this connotation.

Hence a historical issue arises concerning the subordination of grace to dignity. Such a pagan, classical subordination is revived by Schiller, so that his immanent grace arises not as divine glory, but as something merely fated or chanced, as opposed to the spiritual dignity of divinely dignified freedom, however much Schiller insisted in neo-Ciceronian terms against Kant that this freedom had to be decorously exercised.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Schiller *On Grace and Dignity* in *Friedrich Schiller's "On Grace and Dignity" in its Cultural Context*, trans. Jane V. Curran and Christoph Fricker (London, Camden House, 2005).

We have seen how, in Cicero's case, an implicit self-deconstruction ensures on one reading that grace triumphs after all – but it does so in the interests of an impersonal, totalising cosmos. What the Biblical legacy, as appropriated by Christianity suggests instead is the novel idea, not of the dragging down of dignity to the level of charm or grace, but rather the elevation of grace to equality with dignity, of exteriority to equality with interiority, as in the case of the Trinity, as we have already seen. This means that grace or glory or honouring now goes 'all the way up' to the dignified divine height itself.

Such a reversal sustains and radicalises the strange intellectual move authorised by Plato: beyond the highest height of reason itself lies a further height of divine grant and participation, the giving by the good 'beyond being' and reason, which yet establishes both being and reason. Dignity is supposed to be the reserved origin of the gift, but now we have the idea that gift and glory finally trump dignity itself: that the supplement is paradoxically prior to the origin. Thus if dignity is honourable display or *decus* before it is even itself or can be itself, no sundering of dignity from role, nor of rightful given status from working performance can ever be possible.

What is more, the elevation of grace is the metaphysical raising of a factor that has always been coded feminine. If the divine glory is God himself then the divine personalising essence is feminine 'wisdom', as the Bible suggests. And divine dignified 'restraint' depends upon a just, measured generosity whether in terms of the

internal divine life or the ‘economy’ of his creation. Not the reverse, as paganism had at least initially taught.⁵⁹

The implication of this reversal for actual gender relations is interesting. For once more in this instance it suggests that liberal equalisation in terms of shared univocal dignity can turn out to be counter-intuitively oppressive.

Mary Wollstonecraft was undeniably right to insist that gender characteristics have absurdly tended to outweigh shared human ones through most of human history and also right to point out that the denial of dignity to women encourages them to indulge in the machinations of charms that tend to secure them the worst types of rakish men.⁶⁰ However, it is notable that she seeks, in defining universal human dignity initially to seek (just *like* the later work of her political opponent, Edmund Burke) a Ciceronian fusion of male dignity with feminine grace, yet finally abandons any incorporation of sexual difference in favour of a shared property of dignity as right and autonomy which effectively ‘masculinises’ all human beings, since the reserve and autonomy of this mode of dignity is historically determined by natural and cultural male characteristics.⁶¹

To adopt this strategy may be to forget how the realm of feminine grace and charm is implicitly elevated and de-trivialised by the Christian incursion, as witnessed by Dante’s figure of Beatrice. For this incursion implies that a playfully abundant and

⁵⁹ However, in contrast to Plotinus, the theurgic neoplatonists like Iamblichus and Proclus (probably under unadmitted Judaic and Christian influence) tended to make divine reserve and divine outgoing, or the imparticipable and the participable, paradoxically coincide.

⁶⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Men’ (1790) in Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla ed. *The Sublime: A Reader in Eighteenth Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1996).

⁶¹

gracious generosity, as summarised by Beatrice's elevating but gently mocking smile, takes ontological precedence over any 'male' pride in self-sufficiency. To accord women 'rights' mainly in terms of the latter can ensure that the generally different aspects of their nature, biology and needs are ignored, and that we pretend that naturally superior masculine physical strength and mental tendency to impose itself simply doesn't exist. In consequence, women are subjected to this inexpugnable reality all the more, as we see with their now double exploitation in the workplace as well as at home, and in the rising global tide of male violence against them.

Is it not better, in keeping with Christian tradition to admit this masculine 'superiority' but then not just to temper but altogether to undercut it by insisting on a chivalric service of, and attention to the grace-bestowing characteristics of the female sex that generally exceed those of the male?

In refusing this Burkean strategy it is by no means evident that Wollstonecraft is the more perceptive feminist, because – against Rosen -- there is a remorselessly discerning and prophetic logic in Burke's contention that woman stripped of all symbolic mystique will thereby be reduced to a purely biological, animal status.⁶² He is here linking his defence of the civilising centrality of feminine grace (in sharp rejection of his earlier adulation of the sublime as alone politically dignified, which could easily have led him to *support* Jacobin terror, as Wollstonecraft astutely noted) to a more general linking of cultural artifice to theological glory, in order to insist (against what theorists have now dubbed 'biopolitical' duality) that specific human nature is, paradoxically, a contingently cultural nature: 'All superadded ideas, which

⁶² Rosen, *Dignity*, 69.

the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, are necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimate'.⁶³

So here Burke makes dignity and grace coincide in a manner that would appear to be rigorously theological. Equally theologically discerning was his contention that Christian *chivalry* constituted the real political revolution in the history of the West – an observation which soon led Novalis in Germany, a youthful enthusiast for the French revolution, to declare that Burke's anti-revolutionary book was nevertheless just as revolutionary as the revolution. This is because Burke realised, in the face of the terror, that the sheerly 'dignified' power of political will can never be adequately contained or resisted by a countervailing sublime will, which has an equal tendency to corruption. Hierarchical power can neither be abolished, nor qualified as power by power, but only by something *other* to power which redirects it. This something other is Ciceronian *venustas*, feminine charm elevated by Christianity into the mediation of glory, tempering male violence with chivalric respect. Thus chivalry 'obliged sovereignty to submit to the soft collar of social esteem, compelled stern authority to submit to elegance'.⁶⁴ More generally, the real revolutionary achievement of Christianity was to entangle, beyond even classical aspiration, the political with the personal (exactly the aspiration of all truly radical feminism) and to mingle 'fealty' with legality.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft was not altogether wrong to suspect that there is a false note in Burke, that this could all be something of a sham. For in her own more

⁶³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. C.C. O'Brien (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969), 108.

⁶⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, 112.

⁶⁵ *Reflections*, 107, 170-171.

Ciceronian (or Shaftesbury-like) moments, she envisages affectionate love as ascending more clearly to the heavenly than it does in Burke.⁶⁶ Unlike the true early romantics like Novalis and Coleridge soon to appear on the scene, Burke would indeed appear somewhat to aestheticise the religious, rather than truly combining them. Because, even in his later phase he remained wedded to a whig contractualism as regards property and contract, one remains suspicious that his ‘decent veil’ is merely a superficial overlay upon a brutally masculine and ‘sublime’ reality: a matter of tradition grounded merely in human convention and not clearly in participation in the divine – even if there are some hints of this. This would mean that he after all sustained a gap between nature and culture and between naturally sublime dignity and the dignity of grace, elegance and charm.

Yet read in a truly theological and participatory manner, which would demand that ‘chivalry’ regulate even economic contract and exchange, Burke’s diagnosis remains valid with respect to the nexus of dignity, grace, gender and justice.

But is not this diagnosis still wedded to the subordination of the female to the male, and so of grace to dignity against supposed Christian intention? Here, however, one can note here that while St Paul compares Bridegroom to Christ and Bride to the Church, both hierarchies are implicitly flattened by the circumstance that it is the Church which mediates the necessary response to Christ of the Holy Spirit who is divinely equal to the divine Son. The very work of deification itself would therefore seem to imply the historical elevation of women into equality with men as of the Church, including all the sons and daughters of God, into equality with Christ, the one

⁶⁶ Wollstonecraft, ‘A Vindication’, 113.

Son of God who is the God-Man. This elevation is of a single metaphysical piece with the revelation that God is in himself the God of self-giving glory, eternally covered by the veil of feminine radiance.

Therefore to treat women as specifically women, but with regard to the progressively equal levelling upwards of grace with dignity offers far more likelihood of women being raised to genuinely equal human status with men, just as the treatment of all human beings in terms of their specific talents and social roles in all their diversity and hierarchical inequality holds out a far greater prospect of democratisation and equalisation than either market capitalism or state socialism.

For this reason, the Catholic Church needs to reject all the excessive concessions it has made to liberal democracy since 1948, after Maritain had unfortunately fallen in love with the USA and totally lost the plot of his own earlier thinking by endorsing the notion of subjective human rights.⁶⁷ For the liberal and Kantian notions of dignity do not so much offer us anything modern or progressive, as rather a lapse back into paganism and sophistry that divides internal from external dignity and unchivalrically elevates male dignity over feminine grace, thereby validating given arbitrary oligarchy, and demanding that women turn themselves into somewhat more reliable versions of men. (Though in reality an increasingly abstracted phallic patriarchal power continues to encourage them to exercise debased charms and oppressively regulative and psychologised 'maternal' power, to which many failing and indebted actual men are increasingly forced to become subordinate.)

⁶⁷ See Milbank, 'Against Human Rights'.

In this way modern dignity by no means rejects hierarchy or status, but instead endorses the most dualistic and fixed sort of hierarchy which stockades the established reserve of subjectivity and endorses the arbitrary accumulations of property, money, male violence, female cunning and bureaucratic power by the most powerful subjective agents.

We have never abolished and could never abolish dignity as hierarchical status in favour of dignity as equal human worth based on right. To try to do so is instead to give more worth to the evermore worthless, as we see today. It remains a mystery to our media commentators and to many academics that Britain, since the 1950's, has become less deferential, yet more economically and socially unequal. They are unable to see the obvious: namely that a collapse in deferential respect for the dignity of representative status and virtuous achievement *necessarily* results in increased inequality because *axia* will not tolerate a vacuum: where worth is no longer regarded, only money retains any value.

Instead, we can only acclaim human dignity as universal human talent and capacity for wisdom, love and grace and seek to elevate all in these respects, if we accord also more honour to those in whom these things are more expressed and realised, and diverse honours to the diverse but equally necessary modes of living dignified lives. To do so is the precondition for requiring that those so honoured go on giving to the community, in every sense, more than is expected from others.

Yet this requirement, which rests upon a valuation of the common good and so of the maximum possible flourishing of each and every one, reveals a final paradox that

Christian tradition has always affirmed. Dignity indeed consists in virtue and therefore, though all humans are honoured as capable of virtue, more honour is accorded to the most virtuous. However, in the end the dignity of the human community and of all its members trumps even this height as the object of human virtue itself. The whole is more than the height, just as glory precedes dignity and the Triune God, at the highest dignified elevation, is an interplay of personal equality.