

*Neither Beast Nor God:
The Dignity of the Human Person*

by Gilbert Meilaender

Encounter Books, 2009, hardcover, \$21.95

118 pages, bibliographic notes and index, ISBN 978-1-59403-257-8

The dignity of the human person is often invoked these days, but the concept of dignity is sometimes not sufficiently explained, or it is dismissed as stupid. Like a small number of philosophers and theologians, Professor Gilbert Meilaender distinguishes two different ways of speaking about dignity: “personal dignity” and “human dignity,” or “the flourishing of our full humanity.” Leon Kass makes the same distinction, but speaks of “the *basic* dignity of human *being*” and “the *full* dignity of being human, of human *flourishing*.” On the one hand, Meilaender speaks of personal dignity to indicate the equal dignity that all human beings share as a permanent possession no matter what they do or fail to do in their lives. Human dignity, or flourishing dignity, on the other hand, is what human beings can achieve or lose by the way they live. Everyday speech captures this sense of the word when it speaks of people acting beneath their dignity or in accord with it. Upon entering Arlington National Cemetery, visitors read signs that say, “Please conduct yourselves with dignity and respect at all times.” For human dignity to flourish, people must avoid sin and practice all the virtues. This is the kind of dignity that can be lost by doing evil and becoming entrapped in disordered loves, or enhanced by living virtuously and bearing up with patient endurance the buffets of fortune.

Meilaender rightly places great emphasis on personal dignity, since it “provides a *cantus firmus* underlying and sustaining the whole” (8). Equal personal dignity “is grounded . . . not in our relation to each other but in our relation to God, from Whom . . . we are equidistant” (95–96) and with whom we are made for communion. God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ in order to bring salvation to all human beings reveals the worth or dignity of the human person. The French Christmas carol “O Holy Night”

says it well: “Long lay the world in sin and error pining, / Till He appeared, *and the soul felt its worth* (88, Meilaender’s emphasis). Worth, of course, is a synonym for dignity. In other words, the Incarnation reveals the great dignity of every human person, because Jesus took on a human nature and died for all while we were still bound by sin. When most people believe that the personal dignity of everyone calls for respect, then democratic regimes have a better chance of thriving, and the flourishing dignity of a minority can be celebrated without endangering the most vulnerable human beings. As things now stand, Meilaender notes, “The category of personhood is used to distinguish some human beings from others, to deprive some of the dignity of persons” (102). One thinks immediately of the embryo, the fetus, patients in a persistent vegetative state, and heinous criminals. If human beings are in an early stage of development, like the unborn child, or if they have lost their ability to reason and make choices, not a few will say that they are not persons.

Human beings cannot be deprived of their personal dignity by what they do or even by what they suffer. Meilaender justifies the latter statement by pointing out that the “human person—neither beast nor God—is a real union of body (that ties us to the beasts) and soul (that directs us towards God)” (24). In this intermediate state, “to grow old, to wear down, even to die . . . is fitting for a creature who is neither beast nor god and whose dignity consists in being human” (73). Thus, to lose various physical and mental capacities does not violate a person’s dignity “and, in fact, is integral to the dignity of being human” (74). This means that persons with dementia or paralysis do not forfeit their personal dignity. Even extreme mental and physical incapacity is not dehumanizing, because frailty and every

kind of decline are just part and parcel of human life (100). In fact, we ennoble our dignity when we serenely accept the limits of the human condition and our own decline, whatever form they may take.

Without the distinction between dignity as a permanent possession (“personal dignity”) and as an achievement (“human dignity”), people will be tempted to think that the concept of dignity is stupid, as Harvard professor Steven Pinker argues in his essay “The Stupidity of Dignity” (2008), his criticism of the collection of essays published as *Human Dignity and Bioethics* by the President’s Council on Bioethics under George W. Bush. Pinker says, as quoted by Meilaender, “We read [in these essays] that dignity reflects excellence, striving, and conscience, so that only some people achieve it by dint of effort and character. We also read that everyone, no matter how lazy, evil, or mentally impaired, has dignity in full measure” (83). In Pinker’s mind, these two sentences cannot cohere with one another, and he is right unless the distinction made by Meilaender and others is right on target.

The actors in a civil society who take their bearings both by personal dignity and human dignity will show regard for all human beings and shape society’s laws, mores, and institutions (e.g., families, churches, and schools) so that they help individuals achieve the “full dignity of being *human*.” While Meilaender does not explicitly address the subject of how various communities in civil society help individuals work toward the perfection of their dignity (a key theme of Catholic social doctrine), he does clearly indicate the broad outlines of perfected dignity: “To exist—to ‘be’—is to discern the centrality of obligation and love in our lives. . . . How we live, not how long, is at the heart of human dignity” (17). Since the goal of human beings is love of God and neighbor, medicating the young to control their behavior should never be a substitute for giving them a moral education. In his chapter on loyalties, Meilaender argues that educating human beings to have particular

loyalties is crucial for promoting love of neighbor on a wide scale. “Our loyalties begin closer to home, and then we extend their meaning in ever widening circles” (65), he writes. “Learning to love a few, we may learn to love more generally” (64). The implication of Meilaender’s description of “human dignity” is that the family, educational institutions, churches, and other religious entities have an important role to play both in helping individuals understand the meaning of flourishing dignity and in motivating them to make it a reality in their lives. Of course, disagreements will abound once people try to agree on the precise meaning of flourishing dignity in all the circumstances of everyday life. This would be a fitting subject for Meilaender to address in a subsequent volume.

Meilaender has a lucid explanation of why there is so much talk today about autonomy as the essence of dignity: “The emphasis on autonomy is not surprising and, in a sense, not even inappropriate if one thinks that human nature has no *telos*, no way of life that constitutes its flourishing” (29). Wherever the dictatorship of relativism is the reigning opinion, there is no toleration for the view that human beings have a *telos*. Meilaender’s book certainly has the potential of helping his readers to recognize the reality of human or flourishing dignity.

The book also prompts its readers to think about the relation between the two kinds of dignity. I would maintain that the personal dignity of all, including unborn children, is more likely to be respected when many are striving to perfect their own dignity and realize that they do harm to themselves if they fail to respect the dignity of the most vulnerable in society.

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