

Beatrix Vogel, ed. *Umwertung der Menschenwürde – Kontroversen mit und nach Nietzsche*. München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2014. 288 pp. ISBN 978-3-495-48655-9.

Review by Yunus Tuncel

This collection of essays was the result of a symposium, “Riddle Human Being: Human Dignity according to Nietzsche,” organized by the Nietzsche-Forum in Munich in September, 2012. Most of the essays were presented at this symposium. In the introductory chapter of this book, the title of which can be translated as *Transvaluation of Human Dignity<sup>1</sup> – Controversies with and after Nietzsche* (‘after’ and/or ‘according to’), Vogel gives a comprehensive overview of Nietzsche’s reception in Germany shortly after his death. In this period Nietzsche’s ideas resonated especially with artists of all types, as they saw a new beginning in Nietzsche (18). Nietzsche and Wagner were brought together under the same artistic inspiration for such a new beginning. However, this new beginning was shattered by two world wars and the traumas they created. As Vogel highlights the sensitivity of the issue and the renewed discussion of the overhuman, she frames the question anew as to how one can conceive of the place of human being in the universe as between the animal-human and the overhuman (23). This conception assumes a new species of human being and, as Sorgner argues in his book *Human Dignity After Nietzsche*,<sup>2</sup> demands a new discussion of human dignity. It was this monograph by Sorgner and the challenges concerning the concept of human dignity as highlighted there, which represent the intellectual background of the above mentioned conference as well as of this essay collection (26). Vogel had realized that the criticisms Sorgner puts forward are the ones which urgently need to be discussed in Germany by a wider public and which Vogel deals with extensively in her more than 100 pages long introduction (37-57). What follows below is a brief review of each of the eleven essays of the anthology gathered in three parts.

Part I, “Aspects of Constitutional Law,” has two chapters. In the first chapter, “Does Human Dignity Remain Untouchable?,” Böckenförde discusses the legal aspects of human dignity in the post-war German constitution, especially in the light of recent advances in medical technology and genetics. After exploring several positions in the legal debate, some of which revolve around the status of the embryo, Böckenförde concludes that the concept of human

<sup>1</sup> I will translate *Menschenwürde* as “human dignity,” although the word *Würde* is often translated as ‘worth.’

<sup>2</sup> *Menschenwürde nach Nietzsche: die Geschichte eines Begriffs*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010.

dignity is an open concept, which is not fixed in its concrete applications (140); the concept has its philosophical underpinnings and functionality must not be confused with principles. He then asks what the guarantee of human dignity will turn out to be, if it does not reflect the needs and ideas of the times and to what extent this guarantee is owed to a near-born or an unborn human-being. Here the question turns around the advances made in human genetics, bio-technology, and reproductive sciences (141). In the second chapter of this part, “Erosion of Human Dignity,” Tiedhelm Hufen highlights some of the core issues regarding political and legal aspects of human dignity, as he responds to Böckenförde. He poses the question as to whether the state should not only pay heed to human dignity but also protect it. This clearly leads to another question as to when human dignity would start in the biological life a human being: at conception, at birth or in the in-between stages of the fetus? After discussion Kant’s ideas on rationality and self-determination in relation to human dignity, Hufen reflects on the political/legal dimension of medicine and the ethics of healing. State can allow medicine to flourish so that sufferings and diseases can be alleviated. He rightly observes that, although the sufferer retains and should retain dignity, disease and suffering may compromise it (154). This is true especially when we keep in mind that every human being has different (low or high) tolerance for suffering. After examining the implications of human dignity in several areas of medicine such as in-vitro fertilization and stem cell research, Hufen concludes that human dignity is in danger neither as a principle nor as an ethical ground of the community (161-2).

Second part of the book consists of five chapters and is entitled, “Philosophical Aspects.” In the first chapter, “Beyond a Rigid Conception of Anthropocentricity,” Stefan Lorenz Sorgner demonstrates the contradictions and metaphysical implications of the concept of human dignity, while showing how this concept can be thought without its rigid anthropocentric framework. After exposing several contradictions in the German Constitution regarding the status of the foetus and animals, Sorgner asks whether the constitutional law of a liberal-democratic country like Germany should be based on such as a strong metaphysical grounding principle (170). Portraying human beings as a riddle, Sorgner exposes the dualistic metaphysics that operates in the German Constitution; it is a metaphysics that categorically separates human-being from other living beings. His claim that members of Western industrial countries do not share this dualistic conception is unfounded; the fact that many examples and cases of mistreatment of animals and the many do not recognize the animal-human disprove his optimism regarding the Western

world. Sorgner then discusses Singer's radical position on speciesism and rightly suggests that problems must be overcome incrementally, not radically as in Singer. "Future needs the past. A radical change...is rarely in the interests of many people." (174) After presenting the historic context of the concept of human dignity, which is integral to liberal democracies, Sorgner examines some of the recent debates and ideas on the moral status of animals. Can animals be treated as persons, for instance? If so, how would this be reconciled with the concept of human dignity? This would clearly open up the door to many questions regarding human interactions with animals. And what about non-organic (or inorganic) objects such as computers, cyborgs, and BCIs (Brain Computer Interfaces)? Sorgner presents three examples of BCIs. Today computer-brain interface remains at the forefront of research. The status, therefore, of non-human entities remains to be open for debate. The next question for Sorgner pertains to the hierarchy of all beings. Here he introduces four levels of personhood based on such criteria as consciousness and capacity to feel and suffer. In my view, these are arbitrary criteria and no being in its multiplicity can be reduced in this way. But it is a suggestion, as he puts it, and they can be assessed and discussed. Sorgner ends his piece with a note on the future of human being, where he brings up transhumanism, posthumanism, and enhancement technologies. While relating them to the concept of dignity (or worth), he concludes his essay by showing the implications of his proposed post-dualistic suggestions and a post-Kantian ethics, so to speak, where humans are no longer treated in isolation from their non-human neighbors and no longer privileged to their neglect, abuse, and destruction.

In the next chapter, "Humanity's Ideal of Personal Dignity or Naturalistic Reduction of the 'I'? – Nietzsche's Veto against Iconography and One-Dimensional Humanity," Edith Düsing raises the question as to how the idea of human dignity, as one finds it in Kant's philosophy of right, fits with Nietzsche's naturalism. As she rightly observes, "Nietzsche's free-spirited deconstruction of old European image of human dignity is no dogma for him; it belongs to the experimental and philosophical antithesis of naturalism and idealism..." (199) Nietzsche opens Pandora's box for many questions: what is life? What is human? Why is the human between the un-animal and the over-animal? Even more dangerous questions are at store: do all humans have the same worth? The death of God unleashed a horrendous stream of forces, but where is the genii to put them back in order or to re-create them in high style? On the other hand, paradoxical as it may sound, all life has worth, and every singular being has its own worth. Nietzsche's

polemic with humanism can then be seen in the light of his critique of metaphysics and the broader implications of the death of God.

Annemarie Pieper's essay, "The Meaning of the Earth – Nietzsche's Transvaluation of Human Dignity" follows that of Düsing in a complimentary way. After discussing the meanings of and the relationship between 'worth' (*Würde*) and 'value' (*Wert*), Pieper shows how Nietzsche deconstructs the concept of human dignity. Human-beings are perspectively situated vis-a-vis other beings and have no special place in the universe; this was, as she observes, in Nietzsche's early essay "Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense." Pieper then moves on to exploring Nietzsche's transvaluation of the concept of human dignity based on *Zarathustra*. As this issue revolves around Zarathustra's central teaching, namely the overhuman, she makes several noteworthy remarks: first, the overhuman is associated with the meaning of the earth; second, it is based not on a new type of life style, but rather on a human type; third, the role of three transformations—the camel, the lion, and the child—is central to Zarathustra's teachings. Here Pieper offers her own interpretation of the three phases, as she sees the last one, the child phase, to be the highest and the most difficult to achieve. But what do Zarathustra's teachings have to do with human dignity? Pieper understands human dignity in terms of the three phases and states that the worth (or dignity) is based on the different perspectives of the representations of each level. This view of hers simplifies the complexity of many types and trends, as it reduces them only to three, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Where would a type like the spirit of gravity or the last human fit here? Would they be reduced to or absorbed by the three types? In my view, each type that appears in *Zarathustra* has a relationship to the question of value and therefore to the concept of human dignity. Human-beings are not equal; this is what Zarathustra declares. This position, however, by no means negates the fact that a) all life has value; b) all human beings have a relation to value and dignity. I cannot agree more with Pieper's observation that *equality* for Nietzsche is achieved through contest (233). On the other hand, I cannot see how the representatives of the camel, the lion, and the child can be in contest with one another. They may be, and are often, in conflict, but not every conflict is worthy of contest. Pieper ends her essay with a note on Camus, as she mistakenly disqualifies Nietzsche from any collective human effort. She says this is another story; indeed it is. She has not yet seen the collective dimension of Nietzsche's thought.

In “Untimely Thoughts on Humanistic Education” Albert von Schirnding reflects on the Greek model of education, specifically the Socratic one by way of *Phaedrus* and *Georgias*. In this model he sees education as the discovery of one’s true self and the role of the teacher as someone who helps his disciple to achieve that goal of self-discovery. Deriving ideas from ancient Greeks, Schirnding speaks of gods’ affinity to human-beings, having an image of human-being, having limits, community, solidarity, and, above all, order. He invokes the Apollonian dictum “know thyself,” but in the same breath criticizes stem cell research or use of stem cells from dead embryos, as he calls it *hubristic*. With due respect to these ideas and warnings, presumably imbued with the spirit of ancient Greece, I do not see how scientific experimentation with embryos and the human body can be *hubristic*. Such technologies did not exist in ancient Greece, and ancient Greeks not only used every technology available to them but invented new technologies to enhance their lives. Were these inventions also *hubristic*? They even experimented with the human body, though not in the same way and degree we do today. Rather than calling a specific technology *hubristic*, we need to examine in what *spirit* that technology operates and what its *affects* may be. Let it suffice here to say that we all have our own *Greeks*.

In the following essay, “Nietzsche’s Conception of New Human from the Perspective of Hermann Hesse and Frederich Dürrenmatt,” Peter André Bloch explores Nietzsche’s influence on Hesse and Dürrenmatt especially through his new vision of human being. Bloch first traces the development of Nietzsche’s life from the very beginning, as he reflects on his life as a son of a Lutheran pastor, a common background he shares with these two writers. Bloch claims that Nietzsche, shaped by his Lutheran upbringing, knew his life’s goal from an early age on and created himself and his works accordingly, as he constantly reflected on his life and achievements (we can also include *Ecce Homo* here from the very end of his philosophical life). Even when later on the goal becomes self-overcoming as an overcoming of one’s existing goals, there still remains the goal. Bloch then moves on to examining Nietzsche’s ideas on the concept of ‘worth’ (*Würde*), the worth of human being and the worth of work. While he rightly observes the hierarchical ordering of Nietzsche’s concept of worth (262), he wrongly plays into the detractors of Nietzsche’s works and gives credence to their poor interpreters. This shows Bloch’s own insufficient understanding of overhumanly hierarchy, which should not be construed as ‘elitism’ (whatever this often used term means) or totalitarianism or manipulation of the weak, etc. Bloch ends his essay by showing how Hesse and Dürrenmatt engaged closely with

Nietzsche's works and re-created their own, as they were influenced by his teachings, especially those of the overhuman and the will to power, while German ideologues, around the same time, used and misused Nietzsche's works to promote their nationalistic goals. As Bloch states, Hesse was concerned with the protection of individuals from violence and war and the right of free expression; Dürrenmatt, on the other hand, focused on the dissolution of structures, as contextualized by the concept of the overhuman and representations of power (264).

In Part III of the anthology, "Theological Aspects," four essays address the subject of human dignity from different perspectives. Ulrich Willers' essay, "The Displaced Worth: Nietzsche's Perspectives – Christian Convictions," surveys several thinkers of recent times such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Foucault, Charles Taylor, and Vattimo, as he raises the questions as to what God and deification could mean and what the death of God and nihilism could signify in our age. While lamenting for the loss and the displacement of dignity, Willers, serving his profession faithfully, relapses into a defence of Christianity and the dead God. The issue of the death of God was not only a personal issue for Nietzsche, but a decisive issue for his epoch. It is not a question of personal hatred for post-Nietzscheans regarding religion either. Nietzsche showed extensively the problems of Christianity – which are also the problems of all Abrahamic religions – and concluded that God is dead and shall remain dead. Instead of reviving a dead, life-negating God and the entire world-order based on Godly values, one needs, in the domain of religion, to look for signs for Nietzsche's new vision of religion, some of which can be found in Greek polytheism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and, as for post-Nietzscheans, in the works of Georges Bataille. None of these are mentioned in Willers' essay; he remains, in his nostalgia for the dead God, to be an apologetic for a dying religion at the end of a world-order. Next essay by Ram Adhar Mall, "The Position of Human-being in the Household of Cosmic Nature: A Cultural Perspective," starts with a discussion of Nietzsche's three central teachings, the will to power, the eternal recurrence, and the overhuman, and asks the cosmological question as to where the human-being is anchored, if not in God, nature, Being, or history. Mall discusses several religions in this essay, including Hinduism and Buddhism, as religions provide an answer to this question, often through transcendence and conception of a supernatural being like god. Clearly, none of them can be found in Nietzsche, not even a historic grounding. What then remains as an option for Mall is to claim that he is *anthropic* in the spirit of Protagoras. This is a radical claim and to attribute the position "human-being is the measure of all things" to Nietzsche would make

him *anthropic* and anthropomorphic, which he was not. On the other hand, to replace it with the following may remove the charge of anthropomorphism, however tautological it may be: human-being is the measure of all humanly things but not all things. In any case, this essay raises many interesting questions on Nietzsche's cosmology. In the following essay, "Human Dignity in Different Religions and Cultures," Michael von Brück studies the concept of human dignity in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism (343), as he retains a broader understanding of the term *Würde* and a manifold conception of human-being (341-2). In a Nietzschean spirit, von Brück ends his essay with a note on arts, aesthetic experience, and *vereration vitae*, veneration of life. The last essay by Kurt Weis, "Limit Experience and Human Dignity: Body Arts of Different Cultures as Worthy Adventures for Body and Soul," presents thirteen questions in the beginning and focuses on bodily functions or those experiences that have direct impact on the body such as fasting, silence, meditation, darkness, desert, and solitude (364). Weis then lists fourteen body techniques. All of these experiences and techniques are supposed to contribute to human dignity and its enhancement. As he sees life to be a gift and the path an adventure in the spirit of Nietzsche – though he refrains from discussing his ideas – his emphasis on experience is well taken and compliments many of the theoretical points of other contributors.

*Transvaluation of Human Dignity* ends with an epilogue by the editor, Beatrix Vogel, who reflects on the main ideas of all the contributors, and an art intervention by Jörg Amonat and Reinhard Knodt. The book is full of thought-provoking ideas on human dignity and Nietzsche, as well as many related concepts such as 'worth' and 'value' and questions regarding who the human-being is in the aftermath of the death of God, namely the new human, and the place of human-being in relation to other beings. What is the status of non-humans? How can we re-define personhood? What is the role of enhancement technologies? How do recent philosophies and philosophical movements such as transhumanism and posthumanism shed light on these questions? I recommend the book highly for those who are interested in these questions.