

Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, *Menschenwürde nach Nietzsche: die Geschichte eines Begriffs* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010) 288 pp., ISBN 978-3-534-20931-6

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*Human Dignity according to/after Nietzsche: The History of a Concept*¹ examines Nietzsche's response to the question of human dignity in the light of contemporary discussions and normative conceptions of human dignity. The book presents Nietzsche's critique of human dignity, as it traces its different formulations in the history of Western thought. The concept of human dignity, in its different forms and with its underlying metaphysical assumptions, plays a crucial role in many contemporary debates, discourses, and practices. As Stefan Sorgner argues, the concept has, among others, constitutional, legal, and bioethical relevance. Any debate on human rights or any bioethical debate on life/death decision of a patient already presupposes a certain understanding of human dignity. The author, however, does not intend to cover the whole semantic field of dignity; he rather focuses on its meaning as a property that implies equality among its bearers (not a hierarchy), and "...that befalls its bearers either necessarily or contingently" (15). Moreover, this is a concept, which is of particular relevance for contemporary discourses on applied ethics. He then explains the distinction between *necessary dignity* and *contingent dignity* as follows: *necessary dignity* is a property, which necessarily befalls a person, whereby it is metaphysically impossible that it does not, whereas *contingent dignity* is a property, which does not befall a person necessarily.

In order to present Nietzsche's genealogy of human dignity and its relevance to contemporary debates, Stefan Sorgner takes four different models: from Cicero, Pico, Manetti, and Kant with one chapter dedicated to each; these four chapters (Chapters 2 through 5) constitute the first part of the book. The second part (Chapter 6) presents Nietzsche's position on these models. Since Nietzsche does not critique the concept of human dignity directly, the author presents its grounding principles, which Nietzsche criticizes explicitly. In the third and last part of the book (Chapter 7), the author reflects on the significance of Nietzsche's critique for contemporary discussions. Below is a review of each of the chapters.

¹ The book has not appeared in English yet. All translations from German to English belong to me.

The genealogical examination in the book starts with Cicero (106-43 B.C.) in Chapter 2, because the author upholds that he is the first philosopher in whom a concept of *necessary human dignity* can be found. This implies the equality of all humans the antecedents of which lie in Stoic thought, as in Antiphon, for instance. Relying on *De Officiis*, the author demonstrates how the concept of human dignity appears within the context of rationality in Cicero. Human dignity lies in our essence, which is primarily rational. Human beings have dignity because they have reason, which, for Cicero, stands for memory, consciousness of the past, the capacity to plan for the future and to improve living conditions, etc. The central concept is the highest good and in order to lead a good life, one must uphold the virtues of justice, courage, wisdom, and moderation. Only rational human beings can lead a good life, because only they can subordinate their desires to reason and its dictates (desire and reason being two aspects of the soul). As for Cicero's hierarchy of duties, first comes the duty to gods, then to the commonwealth, to one's parents, and to others. Although human dignity is not mentioned in this hierarchy, human beings, according to Sorgner, have duties to others because they possess *necessary* dignity.

In Chapter 3, Sorgner examines Manetti (1396-1459), a Renaissance philosopher influenced by Aristotle and Cicero. Manetti has a Christian humanistic view of the world² with a distance to the late medieval "Misery of Men" literature; on the other hand, a concern for practical life and universality weigh heavily in his thought. Although Manetti holds the Holy Scriptures as the highest authority, the tight medieval order no longer exists in his soul and mind; on the contrary, an appreciation of the body and a higher estimation of this world prevail in his world-view. A proper balance must exist between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* in order to achieve a life according to the highest good. Sometimes Manetti seems to be favoring the former over the latter as when Sorgner sums up his position: "Contemplation represents the necessary grounding for proper human action; nevertheless the duties to other humans in everyday life are so great that a priority to action should be always granted to action before thought" (63). This passage, however, applies to human interaction, the domain of *vita activa*, and therefore cannot be read as a support for the alleged prioritization of action over contemplation. Manetti's

² Stefan Sorgner derives many of Manetti's ideas from his *On the Dignity and Excellence of Men*.

grounding concept for human dignity is *Gottebenbildlichkeit*;³ every human being is God's even image, because he has a soul with specific properties. The soul is of divine origin, hence immortal, and *Gottebenbildlichkeit* of human beings is based on the fact that he has an immaterial soul, which is connected to reason, understanding, memory, free will, and immortality. Although there are different levels of dignity in God's universe, all humans, other than Adam and Eve, are on the same level of dignity. Since human dignity is connected to God's image in the human, we can say that for Manetti God has given, figuratively speaking, an equal measure of soul to all human beings other than Adam and Eve.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, deals yet with another Renaissance philosopher, Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1497⁴), a Neo-platonist. While thinking within the limits of a neo-platonic/Christian hierarchy from Gods, angels, heavenly spheres to mortals, Pico places a strong emphasis on free will, which he finds in the innermost core of the human character (69). For him, a human being has the freedom to become everything that is in the world, and he is the maker of his own nature; a position that will find an echo many centuries later in Sartre, albeit in a non-religious context. Pico reconciles his idea of free will and God's causality by defining God, along with other predicates and qualities, as a Being who leaves humans free. Although God determines all beings and all seeds, freedom is included in His creation as a gift to humans. Therefore, being created by God and being free are not mutually exclusive, but rather inherently harmonious for Pico. Through free will and by using dialectics, human beings can return to God, the source of good life and blessedness. Sorgner questions this freedom concept in Pico, as he suggests that there is always a ground for action and a set of criteria to choose from to make decisions. Furthermore, free will lies at the crux of the concept of human dignity for Pico. The dignity of a human being consists in his free will, which lets human being become the mirror image of God; therefore, all human beings have dignity. Due to his free will, the human being has the possibility to become what he wants (80). He becomes a creative being, a *homo faber*, who can destine himself within his God-given destiny. Finally, *vita contemplativa* is prior to *vita activa* in Pico's philosophy. "When a human does not consider the right virtue in a given action,

³ 'God's even image projectability' or simply 'image of God.'

⁴ Philosophers usually lead a good, healthy, long lives, if they are not persecuted (Anaxagoras), executed (Socrates and Seneca), or burnt at stake (Bruno and Vanini). It was recently discovered through DNA analysis of his bones that Pico met an unusually early death in the hands of a murderer.

he does not lose his dignity, since it is indissolubly coupled to his human being as free will. It is also not the case that a human being who is unjustly treated loses his dignity because of that...” (81)

With Chapter 5 the author has arrived in the thick of modernity; this chapter deals with Kant (1724-1804) and the place of human dignity in his moral philosophy.⁵ For Kant, autonomy is the ground of dignity of human beings and every rational nature (87), and all beings that have reason and will (called persons) are free and autonomous. Persons are ends in themselves and ought never to be used as means, because they have dignity and absolute value, as opposed to things that have relative value and therefore can be used as means. Sorgner brings up two critical points against Kantian autonomy by way of Schopenhauer: first, the self-contradictory aspect of absolute value. There is no absolute value. If I can expand on this point, I would formulate it as follows: the system that grants absolute value to only one part of Being due to its species-specific aspect (human being, reason) and attributes relative value to other beings due to lack of this aspect is already inconsistent within itself. Second, Schopenhauer detects a theological ground behind Kant’s position. Persons are more like God than things; this could be, in my view, because of two reasons based on two attributes of persons: God is also a rational being like persons and God has will like persons. In fact, as Sorgner mentions, there are three types of will in Kant: good, bad, and holy. This last one is God’s or God-related will. Sorgner also raises some questions on the status of those human beings who are not rational, either those who are potentially rational like babies and children, or those who are not rational at all like the mentally retarded, or those who may lose their rationality temporarily like those who are in comatose state. Since they are not rational and therefore not autonomous, these human beings would not have dignity according to Kant and can be used as means to an end.

Sorgner then discusses the connection between dignity and other concepts of Kant’s moral philosophy such as duty, the highest good, moral law, imperative, and maxim, while acknowledging that “a simply underpinning role is not given to human dignity in Kant” (96). Nonetheless, the relevance of dignity becomes clear with the formulation of the universalization

⁵ In this chapter Stefan Sorgner uses all the major works of Kant in moral philosophy: *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Metaphysics of Morals*, and the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

of a maxim, which presupposes the ethical equality of all rational beings. If we recall, this ethical equality was developed by Cicero under the influence of Stoic universality of all human beings; this would later metamorphose itself into equality of souls for the Medievals. Although Kant does not present his moral philosophy in theological terms, the underlying assumptions are the same. To be moral, an act must be done out of duty to the highest moral law which dictates that one should act in accordance with a maxim that should be universal, applicable to all rational beings at all times and places. I would also add here that this way of approaching human action not only attempts to remove all rank and file from human relations, but also erases motivation and the underlying feeling from action. The author agrees with Beck when he reiterates his critical position on action in Kant: neither an act based solely on respect for the law or to act solely out of duty is possible (104). Towards the end of this chapter the author reiterates the point about the affinity of Kant's moral philosophy to Christian ethics, despite his seemingly "secular" dress.

In part II, Chapter 6, Sorgner starts presenting the important building blocks of Nietzsche's genealogy of human dignity, a genealogy that is re-constructed by him. Although Cicero appears only a few times in Nietzsche's texts and Pico and Manetti hardly at all, Sorgner shows how Nietzsche is critical of their ideas, not only explicitly of God-grounded concepts but also of concepts such as free will and consciousness. After presenting many of Nietzsche's basic teachings such as perspectivism, master and slave moralities, master and slave types, and the priestly type, Sorgner uses Aphorism 115 of *The Gay Science* as a framework for his critique of human dignity in four points. These four points are the four errors that underlie the concept of human dignity.

The first error (153-165) lies in the "incomplete knowledge" and concerns the rationalist framework of human dignity. According to Sorgner, Nietzsche dismantles this framework in two areas: reason and consciousness. For Nietzsche, reason is not eternal and does not help us with the knowledge of truth.⁶ It rather emerges through an evolutionary process. Its origin is non-rational, which is analogous to Schopenhauer's ideas on the intellect and the more primordial

⁶ For a discussion of truth, one may consult with Stefan Sorgner's *Metaphysics without Truth*, which was also reviewed in *The Agonist*.

“will to life.” Finally, reason is only one way of interpreting existence, which is rooted in the will to power, and hence a way of giving form to chaos. Therefore, Nietzsche not only disagrees with Cicero and Kant on their conceptions of reason and its role—reason as the highest aspect of human being and as belonging purely to the intelligible realm—but he also rejects their concepts of human dignity that are based on such paradigms. As for consciousness, Sorgner sums up Nietzsche’s critique in four points: first, consciousness is coupled to an otherworldly Being that does not exist; second, consciousness was invented by priests with which they can achieve mastery, a form of their will to power; third, consciousness evolved to improve the capability to communicate; and fourth, the achievements of consciousness are not always in the interest of human beings. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, all actions are traceable primarily to instincts and will to power, both of which remain primarily at the level of unconsciousness—Nietzsche’s, and before him Schopenhauer’s, prioritization of the unconscious over the conscious foresees the rise of Freud’s psychoanalysis. Consciousness is not to be found in a higher plane of Being, nor can it be seen as a ground for being and acting. And the human being is not the crown of creation. In this way, Nietzsche departs from Pico and Kant; for Pico, humans have dignity, because they are *consciously* positioned to be able to freely decide for different life forms. We have already seen how Kant prioritizes the conscious human action in the form of willing a universal maxim.

The second error (166-183) has to do with “constructed properties.” Here Sorgner shows how free will, the immaterial soul and the human *Gottebenbildlichkeit*, all central concepts for the *necessary* human dignity, are problematized by Nietzsche; clearly they are all human constructs for Nietzsche who departs from the notion of their eternal fixation. Nietzsche’s ideas on free will are summed up by Sorgner as follows: first, we should believe in free will so as to feel free; second, the feeling to have free will must have emerged through the creation of the concept of free will; third, actions are not based on free will; fourth, the concept of free will is self-contradictory; and finally, theologians created the concept to use it as an instrument of torture. In many texts, as Sorgner discusses, Nietzsche shows how free will has been used within different power schemes. And free will is an important concept for Pico’s notion of human dignity. The immaterial soul, often as ‘immortality of the soul’, is likewise refuted by Nietzsche: everyday human experience does not confirm it; its rise is an indication of consciousness; the

belief in it is against nature as it is based on other-worldliness; its rise is driven by the priests and their power; and finally the concepts of the existence of an immaterial soul and natural laws are not consistent. The last constructed concept, *Gottebenbildlichkeit*, which was important for Manetti, is, according to Sorgner, not valid for Nietzsche and is replaced by his Darwinian animal human. Human beings are neither detached from the animal world or superior to animals. With this Nietzsche is also the first thinker who announces the end of the lacerated human being as the “sick animal.”

The third error (183-193) concerns the “false rank and file of animal and nature.” This point addresses the question of Nietzsche’s new hierarchy of beings as it de-centers the non-agonistic human hegemony of the world, as conceived by previous thinkers. Not only Nietzsche does not assign a special place to the human being in the world, but he has also developed a new type of human being. On the one hand, the human being is a type of animal (up to now, under the old regime, a “sick animal”). Here Sorgner discusses Nietzsche’s theory of evolution as he sees no gradual development but rather new forms appearing in leaps and detects an affinity between Nietzsche and Darwin (despite the former’s expressed distance to the latter). On the other hand, Nietzsche discerns a plethora of qualities in human beings from “insane, unhappy, unfortunate, artificial and interesting” to “cruel, brave, crafty, and sick,” all of which can be said to be as important as being rational. Sorgner concludes this section by reiterating two important points: first, the human-animal relationship is a complex one; this complexity has fallen into oblivion under the old regime and its assignment of the animal to a lesser degree of being. Second, human being is not superior to animals, but is rather bound to an evolutionary process and can be seen as a transition to the overhuman. The overhuman has a different relationship to animality that could not have been hitherto conceived.

Finally, the fourth error (193-208) raises the question of the “eternal and unconditional tables of good.” Here Sorgner brings up Nietzsche’s critique of morality of good and evil, especially in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and shows how he engages in a polemic with its different aspects such as sin, the priestly types, and their way of exercising power as construed in the Judeo-Christian traditions. Sorgner rightly reminds his readers of the danger of any short-sighted readings of Nietzsche’s critique and also how and why it is false to classify Nietzsche as

an anti-Semite. Instead of repeating many of the points already raised by other scholars, Sorgner makes three points on this subject: first, Nietzsche's critique of the Jewish religion is bound with his critique of Christianity both of which he considers life-negating. Second, regarding his Jewish contemporaries, Nietzsche always emphasizes that Jews represent an enrichment of culture (here we can count his favorite Jewish philosophers and poets such as Spinoza and Heine). Third, Nietzsche himself states how he abhors the anti-Semites and considers himself to be anti-anti-Semite. Nietzsche was also aware of the terrible consequences of the end of the epoch, the Godly epoch, that upheld human dignity based on a humanistic metaphysics, and issued warning signs. Sorgner also shows how Nietzsche proposes alternate building blocks for the new epoch, an epoch that is beyond good and evil, the spirit of which is embodied in the masterly type. "The type "master" as the active creator gives the form to the new order" (206).

In the last and seventh chapter of the book, Sorgner engages in a polemic on contemporary debates, as he shows how the classical concept of human dignity, *necessary* or *contingent*, has been used and exposes its problems. While surveying some contemporary ethicists and their use of *necessary* dignity and showing how Nietzsche clearly disagrees with its assumptions, he brings up issues concerning *contingent* dignity and discusses how and why Nietzsche would not support its assumptions either, such as the special place of the human being in the world, validity of this special place for all humans, and the equality of all humans. He then presents Nietzsche's *evolutionary* typology, which here, for the sake of brevity, consists of the higher human, the last human, and the overhuman, as Nietzsche's alternate theory to human dignity. One part that I had difficulty absorbing in this chapter is where Sorgner presents Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power as a theory of narcissism, and he bases it on how Nietzsche often describes the will to power as the organism's strife for the highest feeling of power (236) and its desire to expand. However, to read the will to power in this way neglects other aspects of Nietzsche's theory of power, which includes self-mastery, the power of ecstasy (the Dionysian), and resistance (not the mention the power of death and its drive). All of these aspects function as restraints on power's expansion.

The book ends as Sorgner develops further the concept of dignity whereby he draws upon Vattimo's weak thinking. However, he also critically deals with Vattimo's position by rejecting

his reading of history as the weakening of being and puts forward a rather naturalistic or at least immanent perspective on the world which he combines with Nietzsche's and Vattimo's perspectivism. His central critique concerning dignity is that it separates human beings categorically from other solely natural beings. Sorgner argues for a concept of dignity which takes seriously that human beings are embedded in the world and that they are merely gradually different from other natural beings, whereby he manages to integrate both evolutionary ways of thinking as well as rather Eastern religious positions. He leaves open which concept exactly he has in mind, but discusses the implications of such a concept concerning important contemporary issues and how recent movements such as trans-humanism and post-humanism have responded to these issues; they have developed a different conception of the human with a critical distance to the concept of human dignity embedded in humanism. Some of the issues presented are abortion, active euthanasia, and genetic enhancement. The author shows how they can be supported by trans-humanist and post-humanist conceptions of human being; trans-humanism considers human beings as transitional and relies on technology as an agency of transformation towards higher goals and stages of being, whereas post-humanism foresees an entirely new human type that will overcome the type as conceived by humanism with its problems as exposed by the author under the rubric of human dignity.

In conclusion, now that God is dead and with it the human being is de-centered, the question "what is the worth of human being?" hangs over every thinker who ponders over the problem of human existence in itself and in relation to the whole creation. To overestimate or to underestimate the human worth and dignity, at the conscious or unconscious levels, are the dangers that lie on this path of thinking; another danger is to invent life-negating concepts that will prevent human beings from striving for higher states and from becoming who they are. Classical thought, whether it be with the Romans, the Medievals, or with its culmination in Humanism, privileged the human being in the chain of creation, while pretending to promote the virtue of moderation; it privileged the human being because he has reason, consciousness, morality, and free will. But how arbitrary! If sharks could discourse, they would have produced a shark dignity based on their electromagnetic sense, which seems to be unique to these animals, and considered themselves to be superior. In his book, Stefan Sorgner exposes the problems of such privileging, rationality, and humanism within the context of Nietzsche's works and

contemporary debates. It is an invitation to thinkers who would face the dangers of thinking on this path. I recommend the book highly for every courageous reader who would ask similar questions.