

Human Dignity within Post-Secular Society*

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Abstract: The principle of human dignity is nowadays severely put to the test especially by the possibilities of biotechnology applied to human life. In this situation, insisting only on autonomy and self-determination is not enough. If we want to safeguard and preserve the image of man, dignity needs to open to the transcendent. This is why we need to reinterpret the process of secularization.

Keywords: Human dignity, secularization, biotechnology, bioethics, image of man

I. Introduction

The *leitmotif* that dominated the self-understanding of modernity until the end of the last century was the autonomy of reason. According to this view, faith was incapable of adding anything of significance to reason, and was by contrast restricted to the silence of its own conscience. “*Silete theologi in munere alieno!*”: this renowned aphorism of the jurist Alberico Gentili vividly marks the start of secular reason as developed in Europe from the dawn of modernity. Thus was born a new form of self-understanding of human relations. Pluralism, diversity of worldviews and the “polytheism of values” were neutralised by a self-standing law rooted in reason. This was the result of the Western process of rationalisation and disenchantment (*Entzauberung der Welt*) of which Max Weber spoke.¹

The outcome of the model of secular self-interpretation of modernity was not only the dissolution of metaphysics within the specific individual sciences, but also the reduction of values and moral norms – in a manner similar to religion – to the private

* This paper is a modified version of Paolo Becchi’s *La dignità umana nella società post-secolare*, in “Rivista internazionale di filosofia del diritto”, Vol. 87 (2010), No. 4, pp. 503–518. In this chapter, where the author refers to the male form “man”, all genders are implied.

1 See also Ghia. For an introduction to this issue, see also Marini; Catarzi et al.; Rossi; Scaglia.

sphere of the individual conscience. The rise of scientific positivism, centred on the paradigm of value-free (*wertfrei*) science, was thus mirrored by the loss of the public dimension of ethics and reason, both of which were reduced to private questions: in the face of technical-scientific rationality, ethical and religious choices amounted to individual decisions rooted in personal sentiment, and were in the final analysis irrational.

The field of ethics has been attempting to break loose from this scheme for some time now. It is sufficient to note the attempts made by John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice*, by Hans Jonas with his *Imperative of Responsibility*, and indeed the *Discourse Ethics* of Karl-Otto Apel, in which the utmost efforts are made to develop an ultimately rational foundation to ethics. However, all of these attempts at “rehabilitating practical philosophy” (with the partial exception of Jonas)² emerge within a “post-metaphysical” landscape that lacks transcendent landmarks. The “good God” thus still appeared not to serve a purpose any longer, with the Weberian paradigm still holding fast, at least as far as religion was concerned. Ethics might very well have become public, but religion had to remain confined to the private sphere.

Confronted with the persistent social significance of religion, and moreover its bursting into the public sphere, coupled with conflicts that raise a whole variety of delicate bio-ethical questions, we are now forced to reconsider this mindset.³ At the same time, we are forced to rethink the significance of a principle – human dignity – that has been placed under severe strain above all by the new bio-technological potential as applied to humans.

I shall attempt to describe as succinctly as possible the transformation of the Judeo-Christian view of human dignity⁴ that has occurred during the modern era, after which I shall sketch out the general framework for an attempt to recover the deep core of that vision.

II. Dignity and secularization

From the perspective of the Judeo-Christian tradition, dignity is rooted in the biblical notion of man made by God “in our image, after our likeness” (*Genesis* 1, 26–27).⁵ The fact of being in this image does not invalidate the Heideggerian “ontological difference”, but rather gives rise to an “anthropological difference”. In other words, being

2 For an overview, see Volpi. On Hans Jonas, see Becchi (2008) as well as Becchi and Franzini Tibaldeo.

3 For an idea of current debates, see the recent anthology edited by Ferrara.

4 For a deeper discussion of the principle of human dignity see Becchi (2019).

5 Claus Westermann perfectly encapsulates the universalist scope of *Genesis* 1, 26–27, when he asserts that “every man, in every religion and in every area in which religions are no longer recognised, is created in the image of God” (C. Westermann, *Genesis I/1*, Vlny, Neukirchen, 1976, p. 218). An overview of how the three great monotheistic religions engage with the problem of dignity can be found in Argiroffi, Becchi and Anselmo.

human has an entirely special status within the world of nature precisely due to this likeness with the Creator. Through man's presence and his diversity within creation, something unassailable and unchangeable manifests itself as man is the sole trace of the divine, of a divine that – through Christ – became flesh and took on human form. This is an “essentialist” conception of dignity, which presupposes a static and unchanging conception of man and his nature. Dignity does not need to be realized; it can only be respected as something that already *is* wherever there is a human being. Man is vested with dignity by virtue of his special anthropological status, his “diversity” within the natural world. Simply put: dignity is the endowment of man. This attribute pertains to him in his psycho-physical unity. Man cannot be reduced to his rational capacity: his bodily essence is an integral part of his having been created in the likeness of God.⁶ This accordingly leads to the notion that, wherever there is any member of the human race, there is by definition someone who deserves unconditional respect and who cannot be subjected to any other goal: essentially, something sacred. In all beings, dignity is predicated simply on what we are. This is because it is inseparably linked or “dedicated to transcendence”⁷ within its specific existential finiteness, within its vulnerability. Man is not God, but has been touched by God.

Secularization implied an unprecedented challenge to this idea of human dignity. The manifesto of humanism *De hominis dignitate* (1486), by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, expresses better than any other publication the start of a process that, passing through modern natural law, would eventually lead to the Enlightenment. Dignity is no longer something that one has, or an innate quality, but rather something that must be conquered. This gives rise to the idea that the being that we are is incomplete, an open as yet incomplete reality (“as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer!”).⁸ Dignity loses its ontological depth to become a value, something that a rational being such as man must earn through social actions.

It will therefore come as no surprise that, for Bacon, it is first and foremost the scientist who furthers the happiness of man through research and discoveries that is worthy of dignity. The conquests of the scientific revolution and its technological implications entail a recognition of the absolute superiority of man within the world, and moreover the absolute extent of his dominion. This new humanist vision conceptualizes the dignity of man as a task and as a conquest: of new lands and of new knowledge. Man's vocation becomes the active life, marking the start of the triumph of the *homo faber*: now mindful of his full powers, he ultimately no longer needs God in order to understand

6 As highlighted by Schockenhoff.

7 Eric Wolf wrote in a book, which has never been translated although nonetheless remains fundamental, that he was *Zur Transzendenz aufgerufen* [called to transcendence]. See Wolf, p. 16.

8 See Pico della Mirandola, p. 7. See also Bori, who translates the passage into Italian at p. 105 as “*perché come libero, straordinario plasmatore di te stesso, tu ti possa foggiare nella forma che avrai preferito.*”

himself. It is a man with self-pride who asserts himself, with his dignity progressively immanentizing.

The “disenchantment” is already fully evident in Hobbes when he writes that “the value or worth of a man is, as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power; and therefore is not absolute, but a thing dependent on the need and judgement of another (...) The public worth of a man, which is the value set on him by the Commonwealth, is that which men commonly call dignity.”⁹

Dignity no longer has a natural rooting (in human nature) and not even a transcendent basis: it rather becomes something that results from reciprocal recognition between human beings. This means that it can be acquired, but also lost. At the pinnacle – although at the same time also during the twilight – of the Enlightenment it was Kant who reframed the terms of the question by considering man to have an absolute “inherent value”, as if this were enough – as Carl Schmitt might have objected – to remove dignity from the deadly logic of subjective valuation.¹⁰ However, as far as the aspect that interests us most is concerned, Kant does not depart from the modern conception of dignity, but actually draws to its conclusion a line of thought initially embarked upon by Samuel Pufendorf.¹¹ The dignity of man does not result from human nature, but rather from man’s moral determination as a rational being.

It is the idea of freedom that vests man with dignity. That freedom, which is characteristic of man, is the prerequisite for the existence of a moral order that is entirely detached from the order of nature. The notion of dignity is premised on the existence of a moral actor, who must first and foremost be recognized as being vested with certain rights and duties in the same manner as any other person: these include most prominently the right to be treated with dignity. Whilst God still admittedly appears in the background as a guarantor of the attributability of the ultimate good, for Kant it is a religion within the limits of reason alone, which can assist at most in relation to moral conversion.¹² The categorical imperative (in its third formulation) is premised on “the idea of the *dignity* of a rational being that obeys no law except that which at the same time it gives itself.”¹³ It is significant that it is precisely within this context that the reference to human dignity appears. Man is not only a natural being, biologically a

9 Hobbes, pp. 54–55.

10 See Schmitt (1960a). See also Schmitt (1960b). I refer regarding this matter to my own paper (2009).

11 The Pufendorffian distinction between *entia physica* and *entia moralia* reflects the Kantian distinction between the realm of nature and the realm of ends. For Kant, as previously for Pufendorf, dignity means that man is a being that is capable of acting in accordance with moral limits. See Becchi (2010).

12 See regarding this matter Cunico.

13 Kant, p. 52. It must also not be forgotten that Kant’s thinking also features a version of dignity that is focused on the prohibition on using man as a means. I limit myself here to referring to my own paper (2005). However, see specifically regarding the point mentioned here Seelmann.

member of the human race, but also a subject, an individual capable of independently imposing limits on his own acts, and of subjecting himself to laws posited by himself.

It is the autonomy of the will – i. e., that characteristic of the will that vests it with the capacity for self-determination – that constitutes the supreme principle of morality. And insofar as capable of moral thought, man acquires that absolute value with which his dignity is now identified: in essence, he loses the ontological characteristic that sets apart the human race in order to acquire an axiological characteristic. Man derives his inherent value from the fact of being subject to an unconditional moral imperative.

Therefore, for Kant man has dignity not simply because he is a rational being but also insofar as he is capable of moral action. However, he is only a rational being if he wants to be one, if he knows how to act morally. Moral autonomy is the other face of the autonomy of reason. Both have contributed to modernizing society and to dissolving metaphysical and religious images of man and the world. Today however there is a risk – which is clearly identified within the writings of Habermas – of modernization being “derailed”,¹⁴ which forces us also to rethink the meaning of human dignity.

III. The image of man in the post-secular society

With the advent of modern science and the development of autonomous morals and law, the illuminating effect of critical reason initially entailed – again according to Kant’s worldview – man’s emergence from a state of minority and the assertion of his supremacy over the world. Man’s likeness with God transformed into his absolute sovereignty over the living world: the lord of nature and no longer the servant of God. However, the extension of man’s dominion ended up changing his relationship with nature, so much so that he has now jeopardized his very survival on this planet.

Human beings have paid the price for the increase in their technological power not only by being alienated from the object over which they wield their power, but also by the destruction of what they have learned to dominate. This is the dialectic of Enlightenment discussed by Horkheimer and Adorno.¹⁵ The effects of our actions are no longer limited in time and space, but have become extremely potent and undefined: through our own actions here and now, as has been clearly apparent at least since the time when Hans Jonas was writing, we are able to influence the lives of other people in other places, and even to mortgage the future of as yet unborn generations. The most significant change to the traditional framework has resulted from the vulnerability of life.¹⁶

14 I limit myself here to mentioning Habermas, including in particular the first essay. This last phase of Habermasian thought has been considered very lucidly by Cunico (2009).

15 Horkheimer and Adorno.

16 See Jonas and Becchi (2011).

In fact, the expansion of technological power has ended up altering relations between man and nature, jeopardizing the ecosphere and our very human nature through genetic engineering that seeks to manipulate it. This is a slowly creeping apocalypse that makes the desert encroach both outside of us and within us, and which we only notice when some serious natural disaster happens unexpectedly. On the other hand, we still have difficulty acknowledging the fact that it is now man himself, as a natural being, who is being called into question. Both the start and the end of human life are now fully under the dominion of technology, and it is the genetic manipulation of man – which is already insinuating itself into everyday life through medically assisted reproduction techniques – that represents an unprecedented threat to his dignity. Obviously, one cannot write off bio-technologies *tout court*, especially when they help us defeat certain genetic diseases, to resolve problems of infertility or to live longer with the assistance of prostheses or artificial organs. However, the important thing is that they must not transform us into battery animals.

Does an embryo have any dignity where it is conceived in a test tube? Is a person's dignity violated when human embryonic stem cells are used for the purpose of research that necessarily results in their destruction? Or what if stem cells are produced specifically for this purpose? And what should we do about stem cells that have already been produced in excess numbers within the context of medically assisted reproduction techniques? Last but not least, is it right to clone humans or to modify their genetic makeup? And how about, after life has ended, harvesting organs and tissue from brain-dead humans (even if the body is still alive)?

Each of these questions, which lie at the heart of contemporary bio-ethical discussions, deserve to be answered comprehensively. This is not however the task of this study. The focus here is primarily to ask whether genetic engineering actually entails a risk of knocking secularization off course, transferring the lost omnipotence of God to man, having brought about a genetic revolution of his own species. The freedom from all external dependence that modernity has tenaciously pursued now reveals itself as the delirium of an absolute freedom, which creates monsters out of a will to power that defrauds man even of his very nature. However, why should we not risk exercising full control over the evolutionary process? Even assuming that the stakes are extremely high – transcending the human race – why not at least try? Why does man have to exist as such and avoid bringing about his disappearance from the face of the Earth?

From a philosophical point of view, I think that the right answer to these questions is that given by Jonas when stressing that man is the only being known to us that can bear responsibility for the consequences of his actions. It follows that man must exist in the future in order to continue to be responsible. In other words, responsibility compels us to guarantee our continuing existence in the world. And since responsibility is the hallmark of man, and sets him apart from other living beings, the first ethical commandment must be to defend his physical existence against any attempt to call it into question. There is no doubt that this reasoning presupposes that the existence

of responsible beings in the world is something good, a value. And as we assume that being is better than not being – i. e., that being has an intrinsic value – in the same way we consider that the being that we are is a value in itself. In fact, it has greater value compared to other living beings because man has enriched being itself with an aspect that had not previously existed in the world. This argument can only be countered by starting from the diametrically opposite perspective, that is that not being is better than being. These are basic metaphysical options beyond which we cannot reach: *to be or not to be, that is the question*. However, the fact remains that being – once it has so to speak manifested itself within the evolutionary process – aspires to continue to be. Moreover, within the history of being, man has already revealed all of his facets, from the sublime to the abominable, in both good and evil. This presupposes that man has an ontological constitution that sets him apart within the context of living beings. It is this essence that constitutes his nature, leaving aside all of his history. However, upon closer consideration, it is precisely this premise that is negated by those who seek to create man anew, or even to create something better than man. The ontological constitution of man is juxtaposed with the idea that he is nothing other than – in Darwinian terms – the product of evolution and that now, thanks to biotechnologies, he is able to become the “creator of evolution” himself.¹⁷

We do not intend to reject the scientific fact of evolution by this; what we do reject is by contrast the claim that this fact can be used as a basis for interpreting man’s presence on Earth as a simple result of the development of matter, as an epiphenomenon. This would no longer be a scientific assertion, but a philosophical interpretation that – again to frame the question in Jonasian terms¹⁸ – reduces the spirit “to matter”, whereas the real question we should be asking should be why “matter” has been endowed since the outset with the possibility of realising the “spirit”. Thus, even assuming that man has descended from non-human ancestors, once he appeared within the evolutionary process this represented an ontological jump that natural science as such is unable to explain; moreover, when it attempts to do so it ends up descending into philosophy, and specifically into a philosophy that purports to reduce everything to the chaotic and meaningless development of matter.

It is only on the basis of this premise – which, it must be repeated, has nothing to do with the acknowledgement of evolution as a fact, but rather concerns its philosophical interpretation – that it is possible to conclude that man lacks any constitutive essence.¹⁹ Once he has been deprived of his essence, it is clear that nothing will be capable of stopping the drift towards new forms of existence within which man will become increasingly contaminated by everything that is not human, a hybrid reality

17 See Serres.

18 See in particular Jonas (1996). On this point see, along with a broad bibliography, Becchi and Franzini Tibaldeo (2013).

19 See regarding this issue Fuschetto.

ultimately destined to disappear from the face of the Earth, and to be “scrapped” just like any other species endangered with extinction. It is clear that, if we want to stop this drift, we cannot avoid making human nature indisposable. This is precisely what Habermas seeks to do in the text cited above, in which he asserts, arguing against the risks of “liberal eugenics”, that “the genetic foundations of our existence should not be disposed over.”²⁰ The philosophical problem is how to ground this “indisposability” (*Unverfügbarkeit*), and Habermas does not appear to add anything new to Jonas’ argument. To say that the self-transformation of the species undermines our “normative self-understanding as persons leading their own lives and showing one another equal respect”,²¹ is essentially not very different from saying that we cannot risk wiping from the face of the Earth the only living being known to us that *can* bear responsibility.²²

If there is anything that should be inviolable more than anything else should this not be man as such? Why would our nature have to be indisposable if we were not to see something more in it than mere biological facts? This is tantamount to saying that man represents something unique within the evolutionary process, and for this reason we feel obliged to maintain his integrity. It is the “trans-animality” of man, to use one of Jonas’ expressions,²³ that is his authentic essence, and should prevent us from embarking on the route towards the trans-human. This “trans-animality” constitutes his ontological difference.

The release from transcendence, and the absolutization of the immanent, is however having the paradoxical effect of reducing humanity to an object of free manipulation: or to say it with Nietzsche, “man seems to have been on a downward path, – now he seems to be rolling faster and faster away from the centre.”²⁴ From the dominating subject, man has turned into the very object of dominance, as passive and inert instrument of increasingly refined and disturbing experiments. We are making increasing progress towards models of post-human existence – post-organic, cyborg, bionic – which along with genetic engineering are heavily eroding the very concept of human nature and what makes it differ from the rest of the natural world. Some nowadays even go so far as to assert that man has become antiquated – and not with the desperate anguish of a Günther Anders²⁵ – defending the notion of a post-human dignity.²⁶ In a nutshell, it

20 See Habermas (2001), p. 30.

21 “‘Human dignity’, as I would like to show, is in a strict moral and legal sense connected with this relational [human] symmetry. It is not a property like intelligence or blue eyes, that one might ‘possess’ by nature; it rather indicates the kind of ‘inviolability’ which comes to have a significance only in interpersonal relations of mutual respect, in the egalitarian dealings among persons. I am not using ‘inviolability’ [*Unantastbarkeit*] as a synonym for ‘not to be disposed over’ [*Unverfügbarkeit*].” loc. cit. p. 40.

22 See Jonas, p. 129.

23 Jonas (1992), pp. 34 et seq., pp. 75 et seq.; Jonas (1966), p. 184.

24 Nietzsche p. 115.

25 See Anders, see regarding this matter Portinaro.

26 See Bostrom.

is asserted that the human race has reached the end point of its evolution and a new reality is already taking shape on the horizon: the creation of a new species through direct interference with the genetic code of the existing species. It is certainly possible to counter this absurd race towards oblivion with moral principles and legal rules. If we want to continue to understand ourselves as being capable of morality, we must certainly embrace rules that enable us to pursue living conditions that make that understanding possible.

But this is perhaps not enough. Why should we continue to understand ourselves in this way? Is there perhaps a moral obligation to understand ourselves as moral beings? This is the core issue. And we cannot get away from it – or at least so I think – other than by resorting to what is ultimately faith in an atemporal, ontological idea of man that refers to his being *genitum* and *non factum*. The openness to transcendence, having been previously removed but nonetheless still being present, can once again offer an important motivational resource. How can we ground the indisposability of human integrity other than by recovering, at most in the form of a negative theology – i. e., a principle that does not constitute a positive foundation but rather operates as a limit, a brake or a “withholding force” (*katéchon*)²⁷ – the category of the sacred that was perhaps over-hastily written off? Before engaging in doubt with Descartes, man never found within himself, within the *fundamentum inconcussum*, any certainty of himself or of his constitutive measure: he has only found it within the religious sphere.

In order to prevent the process of the absolutization of man, the myth of the superman, from paradoxically reversing course and causing his complete annihilation, perhaps we cannot avoid regaining the religious sense of the limit, rediscovering the thrill of the sacred, as the ultimate horizon for meaning within an arid world that appears to have lost hold of the meaning of meaning, as intuited by Horkheimer: “*Without God one will try in vain to preserve absolute meaning.*”²⁸ And for the Judeo-Christian West, that meaning starts with God creating man “in his image”, thus vesting him with a transcendent *dignitas*.

Whilst reason keeps its distance from faith, the semantic potential of religious language does not appear to have become superfluous.²⁹ The process of secularization should thus be reinterpreted: not in the secular form of destruction, but by attempting to re-appropriate religious language, by translating it back into terms that can be universalized. This would make it possible to hold back the advancing desert, if nothing else rendering indisposible the natural basis of dignity, that is our co-membership of the species.³⁰

27 For a general introduction, see the recent works by Rucker; Nicoletti; Metzger.

28 See Horkheimer, p. 184.

29 It is not only secularization as such that has been called into question, but rather “secularism”: that wanting to occupy the space left vacant by God, as it were a pitch invasion by reason into a field that does not fall within its remit. The distinction between “secularization” and “secularism” was, if I am not mistaken, first made by Gogarten. See also Lübke.

30 This is I think the essence of the position expressed by Habermas (2003).

It must be stressed that this does not negate the modern notion of dignity that each individual may realise as he best sees fit, by developing his own capacities and claiming his own autonomy as a moral subject; however, it does render indisposible a minimum content of dignity,³¹ which is enjoyed by each person by virtue of his or her membership to the human race. Dignity as autonomy is not enough on its own. As the modern state – to paraphrase the compelling formula used by Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde³² – draws strength from normative presuppositions that it itself is not capable of grounding, thus dignity must nourish itself with a substance that it is incapable of producing. This nourishment may be found in that great reservoir of meaning that religion continues to represent, despite reports of its demise. Ultimately therefore, dignity must be grounded by drawing on something higher than man himself. It is man as the “image of God”, his “divine parentage”, and his diversity that provides that thrill when faced with the intangible that must make us pause before taking the final step towards our nihilistic self-destruction.

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31 On this issue see Spaemann.

32 See Böckenförde. Böckenförde's formula is slightly different from that which I have paraphrased: “The secularized liberal state [*freiheitlich*] lives according to prerequisites that it cannot guarantee.” See now also the collection of Rusconi.

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