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ON THE CONCEPT OF DIGNITY* (1966)

Before I begin my lecture, let me say a few words about the speeches I have heard. I consider the praise to be largely overestimating my own merits, as even if these merits could be really ascribed to me, they had already been rewarded with very numerous privileges. Most importantly, these include a job which, had I been able to live my life again, I would have unfailingly chosen for the second time. I primarily mean the job of an academic, and specifically, an academic working on the issues I am most interested in. Besides, academic work has always been more to me than just a profession; it has constituted an equally imperative and elementary need as hunger or thirst. When I ordered library books with particularly attractive titles, I could not wait to receive them. The way I felt then was comparable to what is ascribed to someone waiting for a date with an attractive partner. I have had two revelations in science. The first was that you can ask about anything, turn anything into an issue, and keep asking insistently, even if others are satisfied. The other was that in science you can look at things for which the position of an observer has never been considered. I mean the position of a researcher who practices active, strict self-control constantly, a position Władysław Witwicki called a wakeful position [*postawa czuwania*] and which he claimed constituted a researcher's dignity.

I have very fond memories of my didactic work, as long as there are not too many didactic duties. Otherwise, when you read hastily what you will soon have to present to students in a lecture, you feel like those schoolteachers Montaigne wrote about, describing them as being like birds carrying food for their young but themselves unable to taste it. The same scientific passions I mentioned made me an imperfect pedagogue in some aspects. I could not

* The Polish original of this text was drawn up by Maria Smoła based on the magnetic tape script of a lecture presented by Maria Ossowska.

monitor or force anyone, as scientific work always seemed so fascinating that I could not imagine someone might not share these interests. Whenever I came across one of these students who would rather go through university having learned as little as possible, I usually reacted to such encounters with amazement. My greatest concern in teaching was whether I may stifle my students' direct emotional reactions by forming the attitude of an observer and a researcher of moral phenomena. I did not notice any clear symptoms of demoralization, but only they can confirm what was true. Perhaps the poison dripping down the lectern was not that harmful after all, or perhaps my students were resistant to it.

Let me now move on to my lecture.

In Book 4 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, honor is mentioned as the greatest of a person's external goods. Therefore, although life seems to be a very significant good for people, it is sometimes sacrificed for the clearly greater good in some cases: for saving face and retaining one's dignity. In some cultures, committing suicide allows people to clear themselves of infamy. Contemporary social psychology stresses, as we know, the role of self-assessment in human life, as well as what other people's perception of that person is, what is that person's reflected self, the sociometric position. Self-respect can be considered a necessary condition for integration, whereas loss of respect is a symptom of its loss. The importance of defending one's honor is highlighted in the Penal Codes of countries within the Euro-American culture, which always contain relevant articles introducing more or less severe penalties for those who would infringe on the dignity of others through insult or defamation.

The concept of dignity has two semantic variants, one of which I would like to immediately eliminate from my discussion. In the first semantic variant, there are people who have dignity and people who do not have it. We shall deal with this concept here. In the second one, dignity is ascribed to all people as such, due to the privileged position of humans in nature. This is the meaning of the word "dignity" employed by Pico della Mirandola in his *Oratio de hominis dignitate*. He claims human beings owe their distinguished position to God, who created them at the end and, as the most perfect creation, made them kings of creations, equipping them with free will, which allows them to either fall lower than animals or soar towards the sky. In this hymn to the honor of humanity, a hymn which would perhaps sound different had the author known he would die young, poisoned by a human, the word *dignitas* should be translated as "majesty" rather than "dignity." Pico della Mirandola wrote about human majesty, just as Kant meant majesty when he wrote that human dignity is determined by whether humans are their own lawmakers and do not have a price set for themselves as they cannot be exchanged for anything else. This is

the sense of dignity meant by contemporary catholic writers, such as Gabriel Marcel in his newly published book *Dignité humaine*.

Following these initial reservations, necessary to disperse potential misunderstandings, let us proceed to analyze the kind of dignity that is not automatically ascribed to humans as such, the dignity that is ascribed to some but denied to others, and let us begin with examples of behavior that testify to its presence or absence. We shall attempt to find a common thread in these examples.

We shall begin with examples from everyday life and proceed to more serious situations. Lack of dignity is often associated with flattering someone wealthy in order to gain something, which is commonly called sucking up to someone. Another example of a lack of dignity is a grown person's blind obedience, resigning from his or her own reasoning, which occurs when we condemn things when being told to, even though we know next to nothing about them. In turn, opportunism may be treated as a special case of acting against one's own convictions, as someone who is an opportunist in a given group acts according to its norms while disapproving of them internally, in order to achieve some gain, such as being left alone. Allowing someone to pay us for a service that we consider impossible to set a monetary price on can also be deemed a lack of dignity. For instance, in *Wierna rzeka* [The Faithful River],¹ dignity does not allow Salomea to pick up a purse that her lover's mother tosses at her, claiming this would settle the matters between them. In our culture, someone who had saved a drowning boy would degrade their act if they accepted money from the boy's parents. Let us add a reservation that we are discussing our culture, as what may or may not be worth money can be narrower or broader in different cultures. A few years ago a Pole on the journey back to Poland was talking to two Americans who were also traveling to Poland, very worried that they did not have any local currency for the first expenses, and it was probably too late in the day to exchange money. The Pole lent them two hundred zlotys and made a plan to come to the hotel reception to pick the money up. When he did a couple of days later, an envelope was left for him at the reception that contained three rather than two hundred zlotys, and the additional hundred was supposed to express gratitude for doing them a favor. The more general issue of accepting tips is associated with this example. When asked at one of the Independent Labour Party rallies I took part in whether socialism accepts the existence of tips, Harold Laski rejected this possibility indignantly. The person asking the question sat down, embarrassed. Laski probably considered this practice humiliating, as a

¹ It is a novel by Stefan Żeromski.

relic of the relationship between a master and a servant, a relationship where the tip depends on the master's whim.

We consider it to be an embarrassing decline in human dignity when restraints disappear, which can sometimes be observed in elderly people, who cannot refrain from gluttony, small protective lies, or boastfulness. It is also obvious that people feel humiliated when they allow themselves to be cheated, even if it does not entail any adverse effects for them. There are party games that consist in fooling one participant, who is asked to leave the room to let others organize the deception. The deceived person does not usually share the group's amusement. As Juliusz Makarewicz wrote in *Criminal Law*, "Some can be cut short by society when that society conspicuously revokes a certain sphere of privileges from a given person, either because that person is a citizen of a country in general, or because such a person performs a special trust profession (such as a civil servant, lawyer, or notary)." Every such revocation of privileges, as he writes, touches dignity, as does revoking parental rights, which is why in France losing one's civil rights is called *dégradation civique*. Treating people like a commodity, using them as a means to reach a goal, or making decisions without them in issues in which they are both interested and competent is considered disparaging to a person's dignity. We should also add various degrading forms of dependence. Even a child punished by being locked in a room may often pretend to have a great time and would like nothing better, negating the existence of compulsion.

Before we move on to reflect on the examples collected above, let us include in our discussion the most glaring examples of violating human dignity and making people "lose face." I mean practices used fully consciously against prisoners in concentration camps. We shall attempt to reconstruct some of them in order to observe the conditions in which people break down — that is, submit to losing face — and what this breakdown may consist in. This will allow us to penetrate into the mechanisms of social self-defense and social mechanisms that threaten our face. For this purpose, I will use the work of an American sociologist, Bruno Bettelheim, entitled *The Informed Heart*. Bettelheim was transported from Austria to Buchenwald, and then to Dachau by the Germans; he collected systematic observations of breaking human rights in the camp. Concentration camp literature is extensive nowadays. We selected this book because the material was collected by a person who was good at observing and who set himself tasks from the very beginning in the scope of the issues of interest to us here.

The first shock for the prisoner was forcibly being taken out of the social context and being deprived of the position inherent to him in society and strictly associated with his self. He used to be a respected German councilman,

and suddenly, every guard treats him with disrespect and uses humiliating invectives. This is the first step for a person to lose face. His individuality is lost when he becomes a number and loses his name. Still, a prisoner soon finds out that disappearing in a mass of people is a certain form of protection, therefore he reinforces his anonymity by trying not to be noticed. It is better not to see, it is better not to react, or a guard might distinguish this person from the crowd. Mimicry, a defense mechanism in the natural world, is the directive. Yet, by not seeing and not reacting, we harm ourselves and deprive ourselves of the attributes of humanity. The inability to make any decision also deprives us of our humanity. Organizing your time when you are doing forced labor would empower your personality. However, prisoners are denied this, as none of them have a watch, and they cannot predict when something new will happen. This additionally reinforces their passivity and ruins their capacity for what the author calls self-determination. The necessity to report physiological needs and reporting having fulfilled those needs, as a child might, leads to further infantilization. Powerless rage against violence is common to both a prisoner and a child.

This ruining of human personality leads to the ultimate breakdown when people reject a value that they hitherto believed in and reject it publicly. This effect is achieved, for instance, by forcing prisoners to hit a friend, commit blasphemy against the God they believe in, or prevent them from helping their closest relatives. A heroic action would be the highest form of highlighting one's individuality, but the ability to act is taken away by applying collective responsibility. A group in danger due to one member's heroism, which suffers as a result of these heroic actions, will hold it against that member. Caring about others becomes an effective curbing factor, when heroism loses its usual value, arousing resentment rather than appreciation. According to the author, people's self-defense against ultimate moral degradation is to remind themselves that there is a line up to which they are prepared to protect their lives, and if it is crossed, life would lose all its value.

Examples of people collapsing as a result of rejecting a value they recognize could also be found elsewhere. According to Ruth Benedict, a sociologist who did research during WWII in Japan, the Japanese fought under the stress of an incredibly strong depreciation of surrender, which did not occur in American troops. They were not under any circumstances to be taken alive. Transgressing this deeply instilled norm often entailed total collapse. Having nothing to lose in their view, a Japanese soldier who was taken prisoner abandoned all moral inhibitions and allowed himself to be convinced to divulge information on the state of the troops, the moods among the soldiers, etc. However, he usually began by denying that he had surrendered, claiming

that his wound prevented him from fighting and escaping, or that he was taken prisoner when he was unconscious.

Let us, therefore, assume as a starting point, based on these examples, that people have dignity if they are able to defend the values they accept as theirs, the defense of which is associated with their self-esteem, and if they expect to be respected by others due to this fact. In turn, the lack of dignity is exhibited by those who give up these values, and thus, they degrade themselves or allow themselves to be degraded to gain some advantage. We have added “to gain some advantage” because the intention seems important. After all, belittling oneself in order not to intimidate someone with aloofness or superiority (e.g., having superior education) is not seen as a lack of dignity.

Introducing the element of defense and threat seems important in the description of dignity, since human dignity is usually demonstrated under hazardous conditions, performing a defensive function. Dignity evokes respect, and some see elements of fear in respect. Therefore, in their view, dignity constitutes a shield protecting a person.

So far, this provisional description does not reveal a lot as it is purely formal. After all, it is not clear what values can be considered, and what is degrading and what is not in a given culture. We can only suppose that they have to be values accepted in a given environment as otherwise it would be unreasonable to expect respect for defending them. Yet people speak of false dignity and misguided honor, which proves that they mean specific values. An awareness of them was assumed by Aristotle when he outlined the character of a person who is “rightly proud,” an expression that is a translation of *megalopsuchos*. Defending specific values is associated with the word “honor” due to the close association between this type of concept of dignity and the hierarchy of values assumed in the chivalric ideology and these ideologies that draw on this tradition. However, we know that the values that determine dignity can be varied. For some people, their dignity does not allow them to work, and for some, it does not allow them to be idle. Some feel disgraced by poverty and some attempt to look poor even though there is no reason to. It is different to offend a man and different to offend a woman. “Criticizing a lady for her indecent conduct is different from criticizing a man,” wrote Łukasz Górnicki in *The Courtier [Dworzanin]*. He went on, “This is because we, men, created the rule for ourselves that it is not a shame or disgraceful to be dissolute, whereas for women immoral behavior is so disgraceful that if it is said about someone that she is immodest and dissolute, no matter whether it is true or not, this poor woman will always have to live with this label.” Some pre-war codes of honor denied honor to a man who was kept by a woman who was not his close relative. Also, a Gypsy lost his dignity if he lived on the

ground floor if there were women living on the first floor, as he was beneath a woman. [. . .]²

Various things can be degrading in different cultures, but the directive that one should not degrade oneself with a behavior commonly thought to be degrading in a given culture to achieve personal gain is very broadly accepted. Although various behaviors are considered degrading in different cultures, as I mentioned before, I believe it is possible to pinpoint a certain common thread. Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan*, “Honourable is whatsoever possession, action, or quality, is an argument and sign of power.” He writes further, “Magnanimity, liberality, hope, courage, confidence, are honorable; for they proceed from the conscience of power. Pusillanimity, parsimony, fear, diffidence, are dishonorable.” This is also true for petty greed, slyness, or prevarication as manifestations of weakness. An example of a degrading meanness is the miser in Theophrastus’s *Characters* who “is prepared to turn the furniture upside down, move beds and chests and search on the floor when his wife loses a coin,” or in a fragment further on, “when servants break a pot or a bowl, he limits their food allowance as a deduction from their paycheck.” This group could also include a miser who quietly leaves a meeting when it is time to make a collection, or one who does not send his children to school when the month includes a lot of holidays and he pays monthly, or one who borrows money from a visiting foreigner. Behavior which Theophrastus clearly considers degrading seems to confirm Hobbes’ observations associating dignity with power and deeming lack of dignity to be a sign of weakness. We set aside the pejorative meaning of the word “power” [*moc*] which associates it with force or violence [*przemoc*]. It can also be a spiritual power, or strong personality. The Polish word “moc,” just like the English word “power,” is sometimes associated with domination and sometimes with potency. We primarily consider the latter meaning here.

The analysis of the examples quoted above seems to support Hobbes’ view. Blind obedience exhibited by grown people, who abandon their own reasoning in their obedience, diminishes human dignity because human dignity, as Hobbes would put it, is clearly limited here, just as when it is limited by unaccepted coercion, or by depriving people of their ability to decide on issues in which they are interested and competent, or by any deprivation of rights. An opportunist who masks their feelings or beliefs in order to achieve certain benefits demonstrates weakness through such actions and decreases their power, the expression of which would be to be able to freely expand their personality. Some claim that human dignity requires one to live without

² The Polish transcript omits a fragment that could not be deciphered from the recording.

delusions as the need for delusions is a symptom of weakness. I saw someone several years ago who was trying to disperse a crowd that was clinging to a fancy foreign car. He was doing it by accusing the crowd of a lack of dignity. Hobbes could comment that disparaging one's dignity consisted here in admitting that one has never seen such an amazing thing, and thus, stating one's own deficiency. Human dignity requires a person to ensure one's independence, without concern for others' opinion. In Aristotle, a "rightly proud" person did not want to be dependent on anyone, was willing to engage in charity but was ashamed of being at the receiving end of it. As Aristotle explains, "the former is inherent to those who have an advantage over someone and the latter is inherent for those whom others have an advantage over." According to Aristotle, even obeying someone when the issue is far advanced has something akin to servitude in it; therefore, all flatterers carry an element of servitude. The relationship between dignity and power seems to additionally reinforce the use of the term "deserving," with the additional "deserving of something" in expressions such as "This man is deserving of the highest position," as deserving should be interpreted here as an ability, and any ability expands a person's power, to put it in Hobbes' terms.

There is a common view that only charges of a moral nature can lower a person's dignity. This is not correct without any reservations. Not all transgressions against morality are considered degrading, and not only these charges are. The magnificent explosion of anger that begins *The Iliad* does not degrade Achilles, although following the traditional line leading from Plutarch and Seneca to Thomas Aquinas, anger is considered to be a fault of a moral nature. Sometimes the most serious crime does not degrade a person, such as a murder of passion rather than one with the intent of obtaining money for alcohol. Lying or cowardly behavior degrades a person as it is an expression of weakness. [. . .]³

We have indicated examples where offense against morality seemed not to lower dignity; on the other hand, there is no shortage of examples where one's degradation is associated with issues outside of morality. As I said, we may feel humiliated when we get cheated because we appear stupid. Being deprived of a right — for instance, the right to perform a certain profession when our negligence has contributed to it — offends us. Let us remember Hume's claim that a person is often afraid to demonstrate kindness, so they are not perceived as stupid, or pretends to be a libertine because it gives the appearance of a sharp mind. Assuming that a person's value increases with each new ability, Hume could not say why a person is not degraded by poor

³ The Polish transcript omits a fragment that could not be deciphered from the recording.

memory, which people often readily ascribe to themselves, even exaggerating the real state of affairs. This well-observed fact could possibly be explained by the idea that excellent memory may leave in doubt our innate ingenuity, which apparently is valued higher.

As mentioned before, Hobbes included dignity, which we ascribe to some and deny to others, among human virtues as such, as opposed to civic virtues, which enabled a person to live harmoniously in society, which are such virtues as responsibility for one's words, the ability to forgive the wrongs suffered, or preventing a person who did something good for us from suffering for it later. It seems that he was not the first to notice the difference between these two trends in morality: the trend that I called perfectionist at some point and the trend within which norms aimed at harmonizing coexistence and preventing suffering were shaped. Virtues derived from the first line of thought have sometimes been called adorning or personal (*la valeur de la personne*). The rules concerning them and the norms regulating coexistence were different in the past. Norms prescribing personal virtues usually sounded advisory, and norms regulating coexistence were usually demanding. "Have dignity and respect others' dignity" is a two-part directive that illustrates this distinction, as having dignity can only be prescribed, whereas respecting other people's dignity can be demanded. As I attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, the components of pangs of conscience differ in the case of transgressing these two types of norms. Shame dominates for those who have "lost face," but this element diminishes or disappears when someone causes suffering. Other people's reactions also differ when they witness someone humbling themselves from when they identify shortcomings in relation to others. Moral insanity is sometimes interpreted as total indifference to human suffering within the scope of the norms concerning civic virtues, whereas within the scope of norms concerned with personal dignity, moral insanity would consist in the lack of any sensitivity to other people's opinions.

Having noted these differences at least to some degree, ethicists did not take into account the possibility of conflict between the rules prescribing personal virtues and civic virtues. Social writers were quicker to notice them. "There is an inconsistency between striving to achieve perfectly functioning coexistence and a full development of personality," wrote Erich Fromm in *The Fear of Freedom*. Those guided by care for a person usually support people with varied personalities, whereas a homogenous bunch of conformists could implement harmonious coexistence more easily. Interpersonal and intergroup conflicts are always a negative phenomenon from the point of view of those who care about harmony. Their total elimination seems quite terrible to those who care about implementing certain personal values.

What I have been able to accomplish today was only an outline that requires further investigation; it was only posing an issue rather than exhausting the topic. We have ascertained a double meaning of the term “dignity”; we searched for common ground in various examples of compromised dignity, in the sense of “dignity” relevant to our discussion. We have found it in the cases of hurting a person, limiting their options, depriving them of their rights, or diminishing their power.

Psychology, as well as the sociology of morality, still puts a whole array of topics at our disposal: the relationship between the concept of dignity and the concept of person or personality, the specific role of symbolic and aesthetic elements in behavior that violate dignity or protect dignity. The sociology of morality allows us to track what social factors favor stressing personal virtues over civic virtues and which favor the opposite approach. Montesquieu realized that despotic governments do not support dignity, due to its connection with obedience, since dignity makes people defend their views stubbornly and against orders when values they consider inseparable from their selves are at stake.

Those who disregard the value of dignity and limit the possibility to develop it should be reminded of the following words by Bertrand Russell from 1958: “Societies die without civic morality; they are not worth surviving without personal morality.”

*Translated by Katarzyna & Glen Cullen.
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