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## The Dignity of Man: A Modest Proposal

It appears to be a matter of debate whether the dignity of man should be taken as derivative of the personhood of man, or rather the other way around, the personhood from the dignity. In the former case the dignity of man would, in its turn, derive directly from the property of being human. A third possibility is conceivable: That both personhood and dignity are derivative of some third thing. In my talk, I shall concentrate on only a few aspects of this Gordian knot of problems.

First of all, I don't think it can be an easy task to say what human dignity is given our modern concept of person, inaugurated by Locke and going back to Descartes or even -- let me surmise this -- to William of Ockham; I mean Ockham's denial that mental powers are *realiter* different from mental acts. The reason is that Locke is first and foremost interested, maybe even without being quite aware of this, not in the definition of person(hood), but in establishing the conditions of personal identity. Most contemporary analytic philosophers follow him in this respect. In Chapter 27, paragraph 9, of the second Book of his *Essay*, where Locke sets about investigating 'wherein personally Identity consists', he correctly notes that in order to find out on that 'we must consider what Person stands for'. But after having given an explanation to the effect that a person is 'a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places', and, as he adds later on, is 'sensible [and] capable of Happiness or Misery' Locke quickly changes the topic and starts to examine where the sameness of the said 'same thinking thing' should consist in. He eventually locates it in the unity of consciousness, which he appears to be conceiving of as a reflective and concomitant consciousness of conscious acts -- '*conscientia in actu exercito*', in the terminology of late Scholastics. Precisely this unity is what he calls 'self' -- the self that 'can consider it self as it self', in his own words. Having established this much, Locke proceeds to discussing the problem of whether personal identity is anchored in any kind of substantial identity. His answer to this is a No. If Socrates and the present Mayor of Quinborough agree, he maintains, in the 'Identity of consciousness [...] they are the same Person', although they are different bodies and different souls, i.e. different material and immaterial substances. On the other hand, it is possible for someone to be the same man without being the same person (paragraph 20), as in the case of someone gone mad and the foregoing stage of mental sanity. It is also possible, Locke thinks, to be the same person without being the same man, as in the case when -- paragraph 15 -- 'the Soul of a Prince [should], carrying with it the consciousness of the Prince's past Life, enter and inform the Body of a Cobler as soon as deserted by his own Soul'. It is possible, he also thinks, to be two different souls and the same person, though Locke wishes (paragraph 13) that had better not happen, namely because of the 'Reward and Punishment' which one soul would possibly undeservedly have to inherit from another in virtue of both's being the same person. For 'person' is to Locke 'a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit' (paragraph 26). It is also possible to be one soul and two different persons, as was allegedly the case with an acquaintance of Locke's 'who was perswaded his had been the Soul of Socrates' (paragraph 14), but who was 'not conscious of any of Socrates's Actions or Thoughts'. And it is, of course, possible to be two different bodies, the same soul *and* the same person, as happens with a body a limb of which has been cut off, which has exchanged a portion of its particles or after Resurrection (paragraph 15 and Chapter 27, *passim*).

This Lockean concept of person, is, as I now hope to have convinced you, too closed upon itself, too solipsist, too dependent on far-fetched thought experiments and examples, to serve as a basis for any concept of human dignity.

Small wonder, therefore, that a prominent self-proclaimed friend of Locke's and of his unity of consciousness, David Wiggins in his 'Concern to Survive', mildly rebels against the notion of the unity of consciousness, or the 'mental connectedness', as he prefers to call it, and says that for a man to be one and the same person something more than mere mental connectedness is required. What is this 'more'? A certain 'consideration of who and what he [the man] is, or what value he puts upon himself' ('Concern to Survive', p. 305), something that 'made one value oneself and one's own continued life as dearly as one did' (p. 307). That something -- Wiggins appears to be intimating -- comprises even the material aspects of what is tied up with the unity of consciousness, because the concern to survive implies a concern that, as he says, 'this animal that is identical with me should not cease to be, but should survive and flourish' (p. 307f.) Following Strawson, and against both Parfit and Bernard Williams, Wiggins concludes that 'the body-involving, not purely mental properties of a person as integral to the proper expression of his [the person's] mental attributes' (p. 308).

I think we can fairly say that Wiggins advances us on two counts: First, he is shedding a light on the question of human -- or personal, it is not very clear here which one -- dignity. For he urges that the man whose single and continuous personhood is at issue should put a value on himself and his continued life. This is a step forward, for whence else should dignity come if the human being him- or herself does not value oneself at all? Yet this is only a short step forward, because it is blemished by unrestricted subjectivism: Even the meanest rascal can put a value on himself and pride himself upon his rascaldom, and the biggest fool upon his foolishness -- yet this is hardly the kind of thing we would say human dignity can legitimately be said to spring from. But second, Wiggins is telling us that it is also the material, the 'animal' (in the ancient sense, presumably, -- *zōion*) aspects of ourselves -- to depart from Locke, who would certainly protest against counting these aspects to the 'self' -- that can be put value on, and go into the making of a person, and are hooked up with the person's Lockean 'self', the unity of consciousness. Thus, maybe we should say that if we followed Wiggins, we committed ourselves to the view that neither person derives from dignity nor the other way around, but that both are rooted in the 'same thing'?

However, what could that 'same thing' be? My modest proposal is that, in order to answer this question, we are well advised to embrace a moderate Aristotelianism, and turn to the traditional, Boethian and scholastic, conceptions of person, unfashionable though they may have been for the past five hundred years or so. The Boethian definition of person -- the individual substance of a rational nature (*Liber de persona...*, chapter 3) -- is well-known, but it is also very compact, difficult and in need of some unpacking. It does not make things any easier that Boethius is proposing his conception of person in a christological and trinitarian context -- yet we will do our best to transfer them into more secular realms.

I think what he means by 'nature' is best illustrated by this: Suppose we have a thing that is not a 'bare particular', but a definite something or other -- something we can describe in a disciplined way, maybe with a view to a scientific explanation or something like that. Suppose, further, that the description is not open-ended, does not make appeal to 'family resemblances', loose associations of the inspecting subject or anything of this kind, but is clear-

cut and, without the limits imposed by the thing itself, formula-like. It may be rather longish, say like a theory, or it may be quite short. In any case -- Boethius thinks (chapter 1) -- there will be a number of other descriptions available, valid for different things, but let us further suppose that the one for our thing, the thing under consideration, has something marking it as significantly different from the others of a similar sort. It is exactly this marking difference in the description of the thing that Boethius calls the thing's nature (chapter 1). His example is the different nature of gold on the one hand and silver on the other -- we, thanks to the progress in science accomplished since Boethius's times, can pinpoint the nature of either to its atomic number.

This has not been any Aristotelianism so far, but we are now proceeding to embrace it, despite the fact that it 'has often been disavowed by philosophers', as dryly notes the authoritative Routledge *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by Edward Craig and Luciano Floridi (in its entry on 'Particulars'). For we have to ask the question: Is the description of which the nature of a thing is a part as a marking difference, itself a description of an object which is a relation or a property, possibly complex, of another object, or is that object no longer 'of' or 'between' other objects? Only in the latter case can it be called an 'individual substance', in Boethius terminology. It seems to me that that is a perfectly legitimate question, despite the disavowals just mentioned. Now suppose that for a given nature, in the sense just explained, we have found a substance, in the sense just explained -- a thing of which the nature represents -- possibly an improper -- part and which is no longer 'of' or 'between' other things, in the sense in which a property or a relation is. We can imagine the substance, not as a Lockean mythical 'I know not what', but as a self-contained structure, represented by a description which is possibly broader than the description we started with. I say 'possibly', because we, in contrast to Boethius, who was involved in the issues of the two natures of Christ, don't have to bother about cases in which two or more natures are mapped onto one substance. Now, following Boethius, if the nature is a 'rational' one, i. e. armed with all the powers of senses, passions, but firstly and foremostly those of reason and will, then its substance will be called the 'person' of the thing in question.

I have obviously no room here for a full-blown apology of the conception of substance -- Lord Russell's capital error of Western philosophy -- just introduced. Boethius himself is not very amply explicit on it, but it is clear that his is a, by and large, Aristotelian conception of substance. This, as proposed in book Z of the *Metaphysics* (chapters 1--17), looks, squeezed into one complex sentence, about as follows: Each thing that is not 'of' or 'between' other things, while it can be structured in many different independent ways -- say, the thing called John is both a consumer and a professor -- has at least and at most one dominating structure which makes all the other structures possible. It also makes consistent predication possible and is the warrant of the applicability of the principle of non-contradiction. In being a *definite* structure, i. e. an intellectually graspable, and describable one, as well as a *dominating* one, priority vis-à-vis others, structures, it reconciliates, in a way, Geach with Wiggins, a notion of the former's being that there is no 'the same' thing without being a definite the same thing, a something-or-other the same thing, and a notion of the latter's that sameness is a primitive concept -- for being a dominating structure is, in a sense, a primitive notion. This dominating structure is the thing's individual form (*eidos*) and its 'true being' -- substance (*ousia*), the search for which fills a good part of book Z. Aristotle goes as far as to claim that that structure is more properly called the true being -- substance -- of the thing than the structure *plus* the stuff that it structures -- the matter (*hyle*). In this, he would earn applause of contemporary physicists, I imagine, who at levels of their analysis of material objects find only structure, no

anonymous stuff. The dominating structure is also the substrate (*hypokeimenon*) -- in the sense of making them possible and explainable -- of all properties of the given thing, coming thereby close to the specifically Boethian understanding of '*substantia*', whose fate has sadly been to come to haunt us as the Lockean 'I know not what' -- whereas, in fact, it is quite close to the Lockean real essence, which is the 'Foundation from which all its [the thing's] Properties flow', the 'real Constitution of Things' (*Essay*, book 3, chapter 3, paragraphs 18 and 19).

Where is dignity's place here, though? Well, Boethius tells us in chapter 3 of his 'Liber de persona' that the Greek word for 'substance' -- '*hypostasis*' -- where it is used exchangeably with the Greek word for 'person' -- '*prosopa*' -- is never applied to brutes or other beings deprived of reason, for 'the more valuable should be distinguished from the less valuable'. But what is this 'more valuable'? The context is quite unambiguous: the rational nature, reason and will. Yet the word 'dignity' (*dignitas*) is not mentioned. Where it *is* amply mentioned, is the later work of such Scholastics as Bonaventura and Aquinas, who seemingly make no appeal to the Boethian conception of person, but only seemingly, I propose, for they say, in a nutshell: We call something a 'person', if it has self-sustained existence in a rational nature -- a natured armed with reason and free will --, because *that* implies a great dignity (see, e.g., Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29, ad 3, ad 2). Here, I suppose, it would pay off to dig deeper for enlightenment on human dignity -- but the actual accomplishment I have to postpone to another occasion.

#### References

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