

BOOK REVIEW: *Dignity – Its History and Meaning*

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Michael Rosen's *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*, spotlights just that: Dignity. Setting out on a historical journey to dissect the true meaning of dignity – what it is, its origins, and what it means to us today – the Harvard professor goes to great depths to provide an elegant and contemporary view of humanity and what human dignity truly means.

In his examination of dignity, Rosen first looks at the concept's historical context. Rosen begins his investigation in the late BC ages, addressing the philosophical teachings of Marcus Tullius Cicero. Rosen lays the primitive groundwork of dignity by quoting Cicero's idea of "honors and respectful treatment." Fast-forward to the eighteenth century, and Rosen dives much deeper into the philosophical ideas of notable Enlightenment figure Immanuel Kant. Rosen contrasts Kant's ideas on dignity, moral duty, and respect to his earlier predecessors like Aquinas, Pico, Bossuet, and of course, Cicero. Rosen continually refers back to Kant and sets up the Kantian idea that human beings have an unchallengeable dignity. This serves as the prominent frame of reference for comparing and contrasting more contemporary ideas of dignity, including those of the Roman Catholic Church and post-World War II Germany.

Following his dynamic history lesson mostly based on philosophical aspects of dignity, Rosen begins looking at contemporary ideas of dignity. Beginning at the end of World War II, he suggests that

this epoch in world history serves as the beginning of our modern view of dignity. He implies that fundamental principles of dignity became less philosophical when they started converging around the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Rosen regards this period in time as profoundly transitional for the world's perspective of dignity. Then, utilizing his laid historical groundwork, he highlights this transition by distinguishing the historical and philosophical ideas of dignity from contemporary German ideas of dignity found in the German *Grundgesetz*, or Basic Law. From this perspective, "human dignity is inviolable. To respect it and protect it is the duty of all state power...the German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world" (p. 78).

Rosen's historical analysis of dignity is superb. To fully examine any idea or concept, one must first know its history. By unveiling the archaic and historical views of dignity, Rosen provides readers with a concrete understanding of the term "dignity" and its origins. By laying this initial groundwork, Rosen does a fantastic job of preparing readers for the subsequent and largest section of his examination: the contemporary views of dignity. There, Rosen again does a fantastic job drawing distinctions between the historical and contemporary concepts of dignity by referencing the post-World War II era (specifically Germany) as the transitional period between the two. In doing so, he clearly illustrates that historically, dignity was more a philosophical idea rather than a social and political one, which is what it became after the transition. Rosen's precise historical blueprint of dignity's transition into our contemporary perspective allows readers to transition into the latter portion of the text, focusing on how we view dignity today.

Following this transition, Rosen begins his look at today's conceptions of dignity. This second portion of the book is where he begins to involve his own perspective, which somewhat dilutes the historical focus of his text. Rosen begins by stating that dignity has become strictly a sociopolitical topic

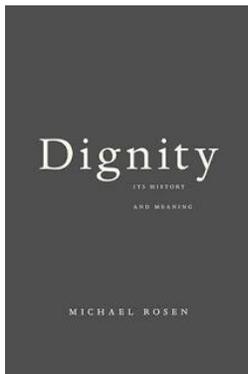
that differs between various cultures and is largely a neglected aspect in terms of philosophy. He goes into greater detail by breaking this idea into three key points. He first explains that dignity is a somewhat “useless” or “redundant” idea in that it can be easily substituted with the today’s standards of basic human rights (p. 5). Secondly, Rosen explains that dignity can be an idea that is demonstrated in behavior or in forms of treatment rather than an “inalienable property of human being” (p. 5). Lastly, Rosen illustrates that dignity can be seen to have no “coherent meaning of its own,” but be utilized as a receptacle for ideas of “extraneous political, social, and religious convictions” (p. 6). Rosen makes distinctions that solidify the argument that dignity can be replaced by human rights. Rosen explains that to respect the dignity of human beings is to respect their basic human rights and “not subject them to torture, arbitrary arrest, and so on and so forth” (p. 6). Rosen describes this idea of respecting rights by observing them and not infringing upon them as “respect-as-observance” (p. 57). He then compares the way we respect human rights to the way we respect the law. We observe the law, and therefore respect it. This idea is, however, somewhat contrary to the idea that dignity can be replaced by human rights in that we observe and respect the law, but without any acknowledgement that the law is a basic right of human beings that we are inviolably entitled to.

As Rosen initially points out, dignity originated as a philosophical idea that was reasonably regarded by most cultures in some way. After the “transitional period” following World War II and over the course of recent history, he emphasizes that dignity is no longer a philosophical issue and that it has been replaced by our acknowledgment of universal human rights. Rosen appears to indirectly imply that because dignity can easily be replaced by human rights, the concept dignity no longer exists in the same historical context it was rooted from. This, to some extent, suggests that Rosen’s previously established “transitional period” was less of a transitional phase for dignity, but more of an evolutionary shift into a global human rights consciousness.

In his examination of dignity in its contemporary context, Rosen draws from politics, law, religion, and cultural diversity. Among these topics, he emphasizes the concept of respect throughout. Rosen continually highlights his idea that dignity can be substituted with human rights, but ultimately merges the two ideas with the underlying concept of dignity in terms of duty and respect. He suggests that to have dignity is to be respected, and to be dignified is to have respect for others for the sake of humanity. Rosen concludes many of his previous digressions into subjects outside of the historical concept of dignity by introducing ideas of respect and humanity. He defines this most clearly by using an example of how we treat the deceased. If dignity can be replaced by human rights, then why do we treat the deceased with dignity? Rosen's answer to this is that, although the deceased do not benefit from our respect, we treat them with dignity for the sake of humanity. In conclusion, he continues to emphasize the idea that if we refuse respect and dignity to others, we ultimately risk losing our humanity.

Dignity: Its History and Meaning provides excellent insight and a unique point of view on a topic every human being can relate to. Rosen's concise, step-by-step approach to dissecting dignity shines light on vast philosophical, political, and social perspectives, but in a way that makes sense of it all by identifying its origins, simplifying its context, and analyzing who we are as humans. I mostly appreciated Rosen's approach. In examining something as extensive as the meaning of dignity, it would be easy to digress extensively, to become overwhelmed with information, or even to fail to find a starting point. Rosen's simple and scientific approach to examining dignity worked extremely well. The only fault of Rosen was in overly discrediting dignity by stressing the overpowering nature of human rights. Although he ultimately reintroduces the human element in the conclusion by introducing concepts like respect and, above all, humanity, I think he deviates a bit too heavily on the idea that dignity has been overshadowed by law, politics, and human rights. His emphasis of this overshadowing effect of human rights somewhat discredits the impact human rights has had in terms of respecting dignity. I would

consider Rosen's book an absolute must-read for any human rights scholar, since there is an extensive amount of insight regarding contemporary ideas regarding human rights. Because the strongest information he provides is the archaic and historical notions of dignity, however, I believe the bulk of Rosen's book would be most beneficial to philosophers, anthropologists, or sociologists. Above all, I think the book is a good read for any human being because the most important aspect to take away from it is a concept we should all consider: To respect and impart one another with dignity is what fundamentally makes us human.



Book Information

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