



Michael Cook | Saturday, 17 May 2008

Human dignity, what a stupid idea!

At least, that's what a psychology professor at Harvard thinks.



In the minds of most people, human dignity is a cornerstone of bioethics. After all, bioethics was partly inspired by horrific abuses of human dignity by Nazi doctors. To protect it, the new United Nations ratified in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This recognised "the inherent dignity and... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family". And nearly 40 national constitutions ratified since World War II have referred explicitly to human dignity. Like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, human dignity is one of those notions that is part of the air we breathe.

But not, it turns out, the air breathed by professional bioethicists. In fact, low-intensity academic warfare is sputtering along over a [2003 proposal](#) by Ruth Macklin, at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, that "human dignity" (scare quotes essential) should be junked. This doesn't mean that she wanted to ill-treat people. Rather, she regarded the two words as highfalutin baggage smuggled in from religion which can and should be discarded. They were either too vague to be meaningful or they simply restated other notions, such as respect for autonomy or capacity for rational thought.

The controversy provoked the President's Council for Bioethics, a government study group set up by President Bush, to respond with [a fat book of essays](#) which, for the most part, defend the disputed notion. And this in turn provoked [Steven Pinker](#) to rebut it in the most influential opinion journal in the US, *The New Republic*, under the inflammatory headline, "[The Stupidity of Dignity](#)".

If you haven't heard of Steven Pinker, you obviously don't read the *New York Times* much. He is one of America's top public intellectuals, with a number of best-selling books on how the mind and language work to his credit. Back in 2004 Time magazine called him one of the 100 most influential people in the world. He is also a professor of evolutionary psychology at Harvard University, which gives his theory even more weight. And this theory, repeated over and over in his writings, is that "the mind is what the brain does". This is more or less the theme of his book, [How the Mind Works](#). It is [an increasing popular view](#) among neuroscientists.

Surprisingly for a distinguished academic, most of what Pinker had to say was more or less personal abuse. He attacked the Council as a body stacked with Catholic "theocons" and led by a conservative Jew, Leon Kass, whom he calls "pro-death" and "anti-freedom". It all sounded a bit like Rush Limbaugh on Hillary Clinton. But I admit that I became seriously disturbed when Pinker quoted Kass's severe condemnation of the practice of licking ice cream cones in public places as inconsistent with human dignity. No way José. Triple-scoop raspberry sherbets are not something I am going to give up, even for the sake of human dignity.

Thankfully, though, I took a deep breath and read on. Dr Kass is the author of numerous books and his views on ice cream must have come from one of them, but they did *not* appear in the Council's collection of essays. Pinker had been beating America's leading defender of "human dignity" over the head with a red herring, which is even more undignified than slurping in public.

No doubt there is a personal element in this dust-up. This is not the first clash between the two scholars. Writing in the journal *Commentary* last year, Kass's defence of a non-materialist account of human nature against the Harvard academic was scathing: "One hardly knows which is the more impressive, the height of Pinker's arrogance or the depth of his shallowness... he does not understand that the empowering organization of materials -- the vital form -- is not itself material." Perhaps Pinker was still feeling the sting of the lash.

Eventually, however, Pinker's spleen dribbled away and he came to grips with "human dignity" itself. He criticised it for being relative (some people find public consumption of ice cream dignified), fungible (colonoscopies are undignified and we willing endure them), and harmful (think of Saddam Hussein's highly dignified military parades). Human dignity, it seems, is a nasty business. It puts us at risk of being arrested by "the ice cream police" for perfectly acceptable things like therapeutic cloning. Why rabbit on about the "squishy, subjective notion" of dignity when you can jog along perfectly well with clear, sharp-edged ideas like autonomy and respect for persons?

Come again?

While "human dignity" is an idea which certainly requires extensive clarification and precise definition, "respect for persons" and "autonomy" are as squishy as a wet sponge. I would have thought that a Harvard prof would be more discerning. For instance, are dolphins or chimpanzees "persons", too? Should Japanese fishermen be jailed for violating the person rights of minke whales? And is a sleeping person autonomous? A comatose person? A two-day-old infant?

Along with human dignity, Pinker seems to have jettisoned 2,500 years of non-materialist Western philosophy. Man, *homo sapiens*, is an animal, but in the words of Aristotle, he is a *rational* animal. Any analysis of man which fails to take into account his evident non-material capacity for beauty, or abstraction, or dreams of the future will inevitably put human dignity between scare quotes. Pinker, astonishingly, is virtually blind to philosophical discourse. This explains why he zeroes in on Kass's scandalous opinions on ice cream cones and ignores his defence of man's capacity for "reason, freedom, judgment, and moral concern". Dialoguing with Pinker about human dignity is rather like discussing the chemistry of H₂O with someone who doesn't believe in oxygen.

When I began to read Pinker's article, I was filled with foreboding about the future of bioethics. But by the end, I realized that it was far from bad news. If the best way to construct a philosophical defence of therapeutic cloning, for instance, is to throw "human dignity" overboard, people will think twice about it. While ridiculing human dignity may raise a few chuckles in the Harvard Faculty Club, it will never play in Peoria. Denigrating human dignity is a brain wave without a future.

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