Human Dignity in Contemporary Ethics

David Kirchhoffer


This timely book is, arguably, an extended discussion on how to make sense of the murder, in Johannesburg in 2009, of Fr. Lionel Shan who spent his priestly ministry working for troubled youth. Around this event, Kirchhoffer encapsulates his central idea: human dignity, properly understood, is an ethical concept that "helps us take seriously the existential meaning of behaviour across the moral spectrum, from the violence of the killer, to the generosity and self-sacrificing love of his victim" (xvi).

Kirchhoffer contends that the dignity of the human person, as a concept, is valuable for contemporary ethical discourse if it is understood as multidimensional in character. On that basis, it can serve as a descriptive category for understanding, and a normative criterion for evaluating, human behaviour. He maintains the validity of human dignity in ethical discourse rests on three conditions: if it is seen in the context of ethics as Hermeneutical; if the person is understood multi-dimensionally, namely as historical, as a seeker of meaning and as a corporeal subject in relationship; finally, if the moral event is also viewed in a multidimensional fashion.

There are five phases in Kirchhoffer’s argument. First, he engages with criticisms made of “dignity talk” and its validity, for instance, when it is restricted to one feature of human beings (e.g., autonomy, biological life) or is identified with Judeo-Christian ethics. In the next two chapters, Kirchhoffer applies a hermeneutic of suspicion and, then, of “generosity” in his critical appraisal of these “critiques.” His goal is to achieve a more finely-tuned understanding of human dignity that does not depend on religious premises but can still function descriptively and normatively. In the third and central chapter, Kirchhoffer addresses this in his explanation (and use of tables) of the Component dimensions of human dignity (existential, cognitive-affective, behavioural, social) as both Already (present) and Not Yet (future). Existentially, for instance, I have (potential) but move to acquire it (fulfilment). Kirchhoffer then applies his model to two case studies: the first on interpersonal violence drawing on psychiatrist James Gilligan; the second on end-of-life decisions in the light of Ronald Dworkin’s thought. In Ch. 5, Kirchhoffer argues for a positive correlation of his multidimensional model with the Catholic Church’s theological tradition. Finally, Kirchhoffer presents an overview of his argument and offers a brief conclusion.

Kirchhoffer taps a wide range of scholarship on human dignity and anchors it in recent historical events, as in, for instance, South Africa. Kirchhoffer aims (successfully) at arguing a position on human dignity relevant to non-believers and believers alike yet one that is consonant with the Catholic Christian theological perspective. The book, in reality, is an elaboration of the phrase (a blend of the descriptive and the normative) used in the
official Vatican commentary on Gaudium et Spes no. 51, namely, that “human activity must be judged in so far as it refers to the human person integrally and adequately considered.”

Kirchhoffer’s is a comprehensive, carefully argued and clearly presented case. However, for this reviewer, it prompted some thoughts, specifically in the affective/social/aspect of the human dignity model. While Kirchhoffer (with e.g., Margaret Farley and Martha Nussbaum) sees the human subject as rational and (importantly) relational, it might help to acknowledge the Personalism of, for instance, John Macmurray. He offers a comprehensive philosophical explanation of how a person’s ontological status rests on being a centre of value. This emerges from the affective dynamics of the interpersonal relationships in which a person is embedded. Relevant too is Stephen Darwall’s recent work on the Second Person standpoint in ethics and his analysis, building on Kant, of “recognition” in contrast with “appraisal” respect concerning human dignity. Finally, Kirchhoffer’s discussion of interpersonal violence and of shame in criminals could perhaps be complemented by acknowledging studies on shame’s constructive role in personal, social, moral and cultural well-being and its implications for human dignity and self-worth. Such considerations are explored from a developmental theory perspective by James Fowler, by Bernard Williams and Cheshire Calhoun in the virtues tradition and, from within the Australian cultural context, by Elspeth Probyn and Raimond Gaita.

Overall, this is a very fine piece of scholarship and a credit to the author. The excellent referencing, index and bibliography support a study that is clearly argued, lucidly written and, in which, the author’s positions are carefully weighed and presented. David Kirkhoffer has something important to say in the field of human dignity and contemporary ethics. We look forward to further explorations of this standard from him.

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