

Review of George Kateb: Human Dignity

Cambridge, MA/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, (ISBN: 978-0-674-04837-9) £16.95
xiii + 238 pp (hardcover)

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Published online: 25 May 2012

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Man's place in the world is a significant matter, both from an existential and a practical viewpoint. George Kateb's *Human Dignity* deals with, *inter alia*, moral philosophy, philosophical anthropology (establishing the basis for human dignity) and philosophy of law (addressing the subject of human rights). Despite the scope of the inquiry, the author has managed to present his ideas in a book of modest proportions.

Kateb seeks to locate the foundation of human dignity and to know which consequences follow from it. Each human being is said to have an equal status, while the dignity of the human species is covered by the notion of stature.

Kateb's notion of 'human dignity' is thus an intricate one, incorporating status and stature (pp. 5, 6, 9, 18). One wonders, though, what could prompt such an amalgam. If there were merely a need to underline the special contributions individuals (are able to) accomplish, the stature aspect would obviously be a superfluous addition. The benefit – if that is what this is – of such a conception is, in any event, that it includes those who cannot claim any merit; for them the stature aspect is the crucial element. A clear downside of this element is its vagueness, which may be precisely what accounts for its success to accommodate those that lack a status in the sense in which it is usually understood (the status of one human being *not* being equal to that of all others, in contradistinction to what is the case in the author's conception).

The difficulties are brought to the fore by Kateb's insistence to consider uniqueness to be "[...] the element common to status and stature [...]" (p. 8). Still, if Kateb is, as would appear to be the case, unwilling to single out one or more actual criteria on the basis of which the human species's dignity would subsequently be defended, it is simply the bare fact of belonging to this species that is decisive, namely (presumably) having certain *physical* characteristics, making the decisive element an arbitrary one. Once the author lists the characteristics that are unique to human beings, it is clear that he dismisses such a way out (p. 133) (and rightly so, for the reason just mentioned), but he does not provide another solution. The distinction between animals and human beings, at least in the way the author presents it, easily leads to the (rightful) accusation of speciesism. (Kateb denies that the accusation of speciesism (referring to it as 'species

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snobbery’) applies to his position (p. 179), but I have found no basis in his work that would substantiate this statement.)

It is not reason (in whatever sense) that is crucial, as this would exclude those who are seriously cognitively impaired, and would easily force a modification of this outlook, either conferring dignity on those animals that exhibit more intelligence than these individuals, or denying these individuals dignity. Neither of these options is open to Kateb.

It appears difficult, if not downright impossible, to delineate a domain to which human beings exclusively belong on account of a non-trivial trait. This may be called a lower limit when it comes to seeking a contrast with those species that (supposedly) lack (this sort of) dignity. The upper limit, by contrast, lies in the acknowledgement of the non-existence of a special standing for those human beings that are endowed with extraordinary qualities, although the author does not overlook the differences between individual human beings. Still, he seems to need precisely the achievements of such individuals to buttress the special position of mankind, pointing to “[...] the great achievements that testify to human stature because [...] they rebut the contention that human beings are merely another species in nature, and thus prepare the way for us to regard every person in his or her potentiality.” (p. 8; cf. p. 115).

‘Great achievements’ would in fact plead *inequality* among human beings (since the achievements of some exceed those of others). The uniqueness of the species can, accordingly, only be said to follow from the achievements of great individuals (or at least not from the acts of each individual); in the most extreme cases (people that are significantly cognitively impaired), individuals are not even *capable of* performing unique accomplishments. It must be granted that the great achievements are connected to human *stature* (p. 179) rather than to the status of individuals, so that individuals may be said to ‘share’ in the achievements: they are of the same species as the ‘great’ individuals and might be considered, from this perspective, to achieve great things if the circumstances had been different, whereas an animal would (presumably) never be able to, e.g., compose music or prove a theorem. If this reasoning is carried through consistently, those individuals who are unable to contribute in such a way should not be considered human beings (or even individuals).

The alternative consists in including such beings, at the expense of the disappearance of the demarcation line (the lower limit just mentioned) between human beings and animals. This is not what Kateb would argue, focusing on the fact of being human: “There are people who are so disabled that they cannot function. Does the idea of dignity apply to them? Yes, they remain human beings in the most important respect. If they cannot actively exercise many or any of their rights they nevertheless retain a right to life, whatever their incapacities (short of the most extreme failures of functioning).” (p. 19).

It is not surprising that Kateb finds himself in a split (or dilemma). He – rightly – denies that the whole human record is personified in every individual, but states that, on the basis of the stature aspect, each one has all the human characteristics (pp. 125, 126; cf. p. 179). On the one hand, individuals are not the personification of the human record (so that the individuals whose mental capacities are exceeded by those of some animals are included – at the same time, a supposedly common ground (the very human record) between ‘great’ individuals and these individuals is lost), but on the other hand, every individual has all the decisive traits and attributes to include him (which is easily refuted on the basis of experience).

The problem with ‘human dignity’ is that it is an honorific rather than a description, so that the reason *why* dignity should be bestowed on human beings remains to be clarified. In the case of ‘human dignity’, everyone who is a human being is *eo ipso* qualified a proper candidate to have dignity bestowed on him. There is no contrast (not even with those who lack reason, who are still treated with dignity (if they cannot fend for themselves, they are

not simply abandoned, which would probably mean their death, but are taken care of in special institutions)). There is, of course, the more fundamental contrast with non-humans (animals), but that is not relevant here: even if such a contrast could be defended within Kateb's theory (*quod non*), this would still not provide sufficient justification to speak of human dignity (at least not in all cases). If there is no criterion to bestow an honorific – as dignity may be said to be –, the honorific itself loses all meaning.

An alternative would be to deem a characteristic decisive which some may be said to exhibit and which others lack. In any event, Kateb's ambition seems to exceed what he can demonstrate, and the extent to which a theory must be justified corresponds with that of its claims rather than with its (intuitive) appeal or the aspirations of its originator. That is not to say that the book is without merit, but such merit lies primarily in indicating what is at stake in the human dignity debate, and in which setting such a debate can take place.

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