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Dignity, Arête, and Hubris in the Transhumanist Debate

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Setting aside the convention of writing a paper around a single theme or single line of argument, Fabrice Jotterand (2010) has written an ambitious manifesto on dignity in the enhancement debates that addresses two prevailing themes: one, the utility of the concept of dignity in the bioethical appraisal of transhumanist enhancements, and two, a critique of (primarily) Nick Bostrom’s two-pronged account of “transhumanist dignity.”

After reading Jotterand’s account of dignity in the transhumanist/enhancement debates, one is left with the sense that “dignity” is too diffuse a concept to do much in the way of philosophical “heavy lifting” in the ethics of enhancement/altering human nature. His analysis leaves me with the conclusion that “dignity,” thus far, is little more than a rhetorical feel-good concept that everyone can applaud. I can readily imagine Al-Qaeda justifying jihadist terrorism in terms of advancing Islamic dignity! For this commentary, I’d like to draw from Jotterand’s and Bostrom’s discussion of transhumanist dignity to dig deeper into the question, “If not through dignity, how to appraise transhumanist enhancement/alterations?” I want to suggest that by understanding the existential structure of persons (not humans necessarily) we can get closer to appraising transhumanism rigorously.

My work has been inspired by Wittgensteinian and Austinian approaches to conceptual analysis—through examining how concepts are actually used (Sadler 1997; 2005; Fulford and Sadler in press). I’d like to present some concrete examples of how “dignity” is used in ordinary discourse as a way of revealing what some of the component concepts are.

Example 1: A medical student has referred to a hospitalized homeless man as a “gomer.” His internal medicine faculty attending admonishes the student to “never use such language in reference to a patient—everyone should be treated with dignity here!” This example illustrates Jotterand’s point about one meaning of “dignity”—that dignity is a status entitlement conferred upon all people.

Example 2: In Steven Spielberg’s popular movie ET: The Extraterrestrial, the alien, ET, while nonhuman, possesses most, if not all, of the traits we associate with personhood—he talks, he reflects, he empathizes, he is social, he reciprocates, he experiences longings for home. The dramatic momentum of the story is built upon an ordinary American family “hosting” ET—ultimately undergoing harrowing adventures in protecting ET from the objectifying and “dehumanizing” efforts of military and medical science to capture and exploit him. ET serves as an analytic thought experiment here in challenging the idea that “dignity” is limited to human characteristics, and indeed suggests that dignity is conferred not by species membership, but by existential/ontological characteristics than many beings could possess. ET’s kind of “being” is one that talks, reflects, sympathizes, socializes, reciprocates, and experiences longings (to name a few existential characteristics of persons).

Example 3: In the popular Star Wars science fiction trilogy, the Wookiee Chewbacca (member of an intelligent nonhuman species) is frantic when his robotic companion, C3PO, is broken to pieces in battle. Chewy carries the pieces of C3PO on his back and later reassembles the robot to restore him to his prior functional competence. The robot is a diplomatic assistance “droid” fluent in millions of languages, and possessing numerous humanoid traits—empathy, anxiety responses, docility, preoccupation with protocol, etc. The moviegoer is crestfallen at the lovable droid’s fate, and viewers easily experience C3PO’s sorry state as “undignified.” (Further, C3PO exhibits shame at the naked incompleteness of his repair at one point.) Indeed, the robot’s character exemplifies the dignity of a traditional English butler. While no robots like him currently exist, C3PO poses a thought experiment suggesting that machines could possess the dignity accorded to a butler or a diplomat, driven by a service orientation and a rigorous attention to courtesy and protocol, and entitled to the regard and affection accorded to human beings—yet be a machine.

Example 4: Ms. T is the retired chairwoman of a multinational corporation, but is now confined to nursing care because of advanced Alzheimer’s dementia. We encounter her during her breakfast, and are chagrined to note that she sits in a restraint chair, clothes in disarray, with clumps of oatmeal smearing her face, oatmeal bowl upside down on her tray. One of us remarks that she is undignified in her state and requires nursing attention. Moreover, many would agree that Ms. T has lost some amount of dignity because of the deficits of her ill state. Ms. T is an example of Jotterand’s notion of a graded, dimensional dignity—Ms. T has “lost” some of her dignity because of her current sorry state (much like C3PO’s broken state), and many would regard her disease state as undignifying to her. Nevertheless, Ms. T still possesses her “status” dignity as a fellow human as illustrated in example 1.

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Example 5: Sergeant Jones is an Iraq war veteran who arrived home with an above-the-knee amputation as a result of a rocket-propelled grenade attack in Baghdad. Sergeant Jones is ashamed of his confinement to a wheelchair and embarrassed by his need for assistance. When he is successfully fitted with a leg prosthesis, he says “Thank you for restoring my dignity.” What this example illustrates about dignity, I think, is that devices like the prosthesis can be assimilated very quickly into the holistic, existential experience of human dignity, and Sergeant Jones’s partial restoration by the prosthesis has positively contributed to removing the graded amount of indignity conferred by his injury. If Sergeant Jones’s prothetic was improved to be supernormal (incorporating technological features like superhuman strength), few would argue that Jones’s dignity was diminished, especially Jones, who would likely be delighted with the improvements (assuming they work as designed!). But would Jones be “more” dignified by a superfunctional prosthesis?

Because the transhumanist debate involves the domain of scientific possibility, science fiction examples like 2 and 3 just described should be taken as seriously as other speculative and real examples that populate the enhancement discussion. I think these examples refute the idea that machines, per se, cannot, in principle, possess the kinds of dignity we express in ordinary and fictional life. In Jones’s case, the prosthesis is assimilated into a phenomenological integrity with the rest of Jones’s embodiment—not a perfect one, but a good enough step toward restoration. In the sci-fi examples, the alien and robot appear to possess familiar existential features of personhood. We regard them as we do human persons and moral agents.

Example 6: Return to the realm of science fiction with Spider-Man 2, a film adaptation of the popular Marvel Comics series. In this film, Otto Octavius, “Dr. Octopus,” an initially well-intended scientist, builds for himself four mechanical arms as additional prosthetic limbs—superfunctional ones at that. In the context of a laboratory accident, Octavius becomes mentally disordered and becomes a public threat. The typical audience reaction to Doc Ock is not sympathy at his loss of “dignity,” but horror at his monstrosity. What differentiates the Doc Ocks of enhancement, versus our other five examples?

I would argue that several factors make Dr. Octopus a horrific example of “enhancement.” The most obvious are his antisocial actions, however incapacitated he may be. However, many are horrified at Octavius before his evil capacities are manifest—especially children. Why? Of most interest here, I think, is that Octavius has stepped beyond the bounds of our existential expectations of personhood, one component of which is “dignity” perhaps, but also dimensions of human existence like reciprocity and regard for others, the cherishing of personal uniqueness, the pursuit of personal excellences through self-discipline and self-work, and the recognition that existential limitations differentiate the significant from the disposable. Octavius’s arms repel us as a perversity, as we are repelled by people who have made their appearance monstrous through excessive “cosmetic” surgeries. This notion of perversity should be unpacked as not just another “yuck factor” claim. I think perversities are perverse because they disregard the better existential features of personhood—many of those features discussed in earlier examples. Secondarily, Octavius’s pursuit of “excellence” is reminiscent of the hubris in Mary Shelley’s classic novel Frankenstein (2003). We want to remember that persons, including scientists, should remain humble and recognize their small place in the universe. The hubris myth, with its inevitable postscript of awful unforeseen consequences, persists through science fiction as well as ordinary fiction.

Hubris as a vice has a strange and perhaps paradoxical relationship to the “excellences” that Bostrom, in Jotterand’s interpretation, has grafted onto the “dignity” concept. That Bostrom’s transhumanist modification of dignity sounds a lot like Aristotle’s notion of arete (Aristotle 1984) is a deeper paradox. What happens to the vice of hubris when the virtue of humility is dismantled by a transhumanist pursuit of “excellences”?

REFERENCES


