

THE HUMAN DIGNITY CONSPIRACY

In 2001 George W. Bush created the President's Council on Bioethics to "provide a forum for the national discussion of bioethics issues." The elusive idea of human dignity lay behind many contemporary controversies in bioethics, the Council believed, so it commissioned twenty essays by a diverse group of writers and published them in a collection, *Human Dignity and Bioethics*.¹ The book was more concerned to highlight controversy than to produce consensus, and it offered no particular set of policy recommendations. Council members—of which I am one—considered the volume a Socratic invitation to inquiry: nothing more, and nothing less.

The best-selling Harvard sociobiological psychologist Steven Pinker saw a lot more. In a widely noticed long essay in the *New Republic*, he described the book as an aggressive attempt, fueled by radical "religious impulses," to roll back the American experiment in ordered liberty by "imposing a Catholic agenda on American secular democracy." Dignity, in that agenda, would trump the scientific progress that enhances our pursuits of life, liberty, and happiness. Bioethics would become a weapon in opposition to innovative medical breakthroughs that aim "to maximize health and flourishing."²

In his *New Republic* essay, Pinker complains that the word "dignity" is simply stupid; it corresponds to no reality known by science. Pinker does not really think that the word "justice" corresponds to any "scientific" reality either, but he endorses appeals to justice as a beneficial way of deterring criminals. The "scientific" fact that we always do an injustice when we punish someone according to an objectively unrealistic standard of justice does not bother him.³ After all, most people are better off as a result. So it is not so much that dignity is stupid; rather, it is worse than useless—it is an instrument of tyranny. "Dignity" has been mobilized as part of the conservatives' war against science and human liberty.

Pinker both outs what he sees as a Catholic conspiracy and directs most of his fire against a writer who is not even a Catholic: the Council's first chairman, Leon Kass. It is Kass's "pro-death, anti-freedom" views, which are "well outside the American mainstream," that Pinker particularly loathes. He accuses Kass of calling undignified anything that gives

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anyone “the creeps”—and “for Kass, that includes eating ice-cream cones in public.” The dignity-freak Kass, Pinker goes on, is guilty of wild exaggerations. Kass calls efforts to extend the duration of particular human lives “the pursuit of immortality,” efforts to improve human performance “the pursuit of perfection,” and screening to protect babies from genetic defects and diseases “designing babies.”⁴

Pinker wildly exaggerates Kass’s propensity to exaggerate, but I do agree that Kass might be overly concerned about the possibility of a Brave New World. Only one chapter of the Council’s book is by Kass, however, and most of the other writers disagree with him in a variety of ways. Pinker’s objection to “dignity” *in toto* is fundamentally misguided and most unscientific. It is perfectly reasonable to wonder whether our views of dignity, equality, and liberty depend on religious premises, and reasonable men—including reasonable scientists—disagree on the answer. It is just as reasonable to wonder how “scientific” some scientists really are who cannot account for the dignified human behavior we observe every day.

WHAT IS DIGNITY?

The word “dignity” is not particularly Christian. It has no special significance in the Scriptures and not much history as a theological concept. Only in the twentieth century did moral theologians begin to use it when addressing issues such as abortion, religious liberty, and economic justice. Neither does the word come to us from the classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who were concerned with the phenomenon of human excellence (*arête*) and the “manly” human need to be important or significant. Aristotle’s magnanimous man, we would now say, possesses dignified self-confidence. Aristotle

also writes that nobility—what we would now likely call dignity—shines forth in even the most unfortunate circumstances. My nobility or dignity is more my own than is my happiness, which depends on forces beyond my control.⁵

It was with such Greek reflections in mind that the Roman word *dignitas* took on a basically aristocratic connotation. Dignity is a worthiness or virtue that must be earned, and the dignified man is someone exceptional who attains distinction by his inner strength of character. *Dignitas* is a self-contained serenity, a kind of solid immobility that cannot be affected by worldly fortunes. For the Stoics, and especially for Cicero, dignity is democratic in the sense that it does not depend on social status; it is within reach of everyone from the slave (Epictetus) to the emperor (Marcus Aurelius). Dignity refers to the rational life possible for us all, but it is really characteristic only of the rare human being who is genuinely devoted to living according to reason.

Dignity, the contemporary Stoic novelist Tom Wolfe shows in *A Man in Full*,⁶ can shine through even in the life of a maximum-security prisoner who seems to have been deprived of every human good. Wolfe’s novel shows both that the Stoic way of thinking is almost completely alien to American life today and that it still has powerful explanatory power. He shows us that our sociobiologists and neuroscientists have something to learn from what we might call *Stoic science*. The Council’s book would have been more comprehensive had a genuine Stoic contributed a chapter, but no critic has yet registered that complaint.

The early modern philosophers—following, in a certain way, St. Augustine’s Christian critique of Stoic vanity—denied that human beings could ever achieve a rational, inward insulation from the effects

of fortune. They contended instead that it is undignified to allow oneself to be a plaything of fortune—of forces and to people beyond your control. There is nothing genuinely dignified in Stoic self-deception about our real bodily dependence. Human beings are stuck with being concerned, most of all, with keeping their fragile bodies alive. So there is something dignified in facing up to that truth and doing something about it—acting with freedom and intelligence to make yourself more secure.

In Hobbes' view, your own life is infinitely valuable and irreplaceable to you, but it cannot seem that way to anyone else. Therefore, Hobbes reasons, your dignity is nothing more than your "public worth." And that is nothing more than the price your powers can bring: your dignity is your productivity.⁷ Others recognize your worth only insofar as they can use—and are willing to pay for—what you can do. We have every right to work to become as dignified as we can be, but we do not have an equal right to dignity. Hobbes is for equal rights, but equal dignity is impossible.

There is a lot to be said for ranking people—determining their excellence or importance—according to their productivity. Vain illusions which generate the idleness that comes with inward serenity are dispelled. There is, we learn, no invisible realm of freedom, no impregnable Stoic fortress, into which we can securely retreat. It is undeniable progress to stop ranking people according to their social class, gender, race, religion, and so forth. Productivity is the most visible and surest foundation for a meritocracy—which is why Americans today are having more trouble than ever finding a higher standard than productivity to determine their dignity. Even with the economic downturn, Americans are wealthier and freer than ever, but their dignity seems to depend on

being useful and pleasing to others. They increasingly lack the inward self-confidence that comes with having a personal standard higher than "success." We might want to say that Americans are both more and less free than ever—and in a way that would earn a Stoic's cold contempt.

Transhumanists, Charles Rubin explains in his contribution to the Council volume, highlight through exaggeration another reason why it might make sense to identify our dignity with productivity: namely, our powerful inventions. Our present existence is most undignified. We are, as Agent Smith says in *The Matrix*, a kind of virus or cancer plagues nature. We are the only animal that cannot achieve equilibrium with its natural environment. We individuals cannot help but be restlessly discontent with nature's cruel and random indifference to each of our particular existences. Nature itself is an accidental, impersonal process, and we, in our freedom, are accidental exceptions to every natural rule. Surely it is undignified for us meekly to accept what nature imposes on us.⁸

We—the free, technological beings—can transform nature with our desire for individual security and significance in mind. We display our dignity by imposing our will on nature to create a world where we can live as dignified beings—or not, as miserably self-conscious and utterly precarious accidents. We can free ourselves from our all-too-human or natural limitations; we can bring our bodies under our rational and willful control. Dignity is displayed in the freedom that produces the rational control allowing us to give orders to nature, including to our own bodies.

The transhumanist impulse vividly illuminates Hobbes' latent misanthropy. The point of human freedom is to devote yourself to an endless and ultimately futile effort to make yourself into some-

thing else. Kant attempted to counter that misanthropy with the other characteristically modern view of dignity. “Humanity itself,” according to Kant, “is a dignity.”⁹ Kant agrees with the modern transhumanists that we are undignified insofar as we are determined by nature, by our embodiment. But he disagrees that our dignity depends on our technological transformation of nature. Each of us is already free and dignified, because what we think and do, insofar as we are human, is not determined by impersonal natural forces. We are free to treat other dignified persons as persons—not merely as impersonal means to achieve our personal goals. Anyone who reduces dignity to productivity turns other human beings into exploitable resources. The dignified being does not have a price, and we are all, as free and rational persons, capable of acting with our equal dignity in mind.

Leon Kass, in his own contribution to the Council volume, explains that Kant actually joins the transhumanists in opposing dignity to the way human beings actually are. For Kant, we are dignified insofar as we are free from the limitations of our embodiment. That means there is no dignity in “begetting”—what we do as devoted parents and children—and there is no dignity in “belonging”—what we do as devoted members of particular communities.¹⁰ Kant’s dignity of rational choice accords no respect to what we do out of love; to be human is to be rational and willful, but not at all erotic. This means that Kant is the source of a kind of humanitarianism that reduces dignity to personal autonomy. For Kant, the *person* is fundamentally distinct from the human *animal*—the whole biological being—whom we actually know and love.¹¹

Given the inhuman premises of Hobbes’ and Kant’s views of dignity, as well as the

inegalitarian and somewhat vain premises of the Stoics, we might conclude that prudence dictates dignity *not* guide American public policy. Americans will be free to display their dignity through productivity, but that will be their private affair. Kantians will be similarly free to display their nobility, but the law itself should not aim any higher than the protection of “natural rights.” The Declaration of Independence does not say that the Creator gave men equal dignity, only equal rights. The Declaration does implicitly affirm a kind of dignity or rare excellence in the actions of men who put their lives and fortunes on the line for their “sacred honor,” but it does not suggest that in a rights-based country men should be *required* to put their honor before their rights. Rights, unlike dignity, do not reduce men to their “cash value” or require of them some supra-natural virtue. We might therefore conclude that our political community is sufficiently formed by our common devotion to equal rights, and that our necessarily unequal dignity should remain a merely private concern.

DIGNITY NOW

Still, almost all the contributors to the Council’s volume, including the scientist Daniel Dennett, share a relatively new but widespread belief that our lives will become worse if we cannot speak publicly and confidently about human dignity. This new belief arose from what was learned in the experiences of the twentieth century—and the twenty-first. What the totalitarian regimes did was much worse than violating rights. The Nazis engaged in murderous eugenics on a massive scale, intent to extinguish whole classes of human beings and to reduce us all to less than who we really are. The Communists wanted to eliminate the very possibility of experiencing the dignity of living in light of the truth. Their

goal was to have the historical lie of ideology replace who we really are and what we can really know. Through their courageous and truthful thought and action, great anticommunist dissidents such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Vaclav Havel gave evidence of human dignity in the face of the ideological lie; their achievement is trivialized if one says they were merely defending their rights. Anyone who mistakenly identifies dignity with bare productivity or abstract autonomy cannot really see the natural, spiritual greatness of men and women ready to sacrifice everything to defend who we really are.

In the twenty-first century, biotechnology promises to provide us with the means of changing our nature to maximize our comfort, security, and happiness. Our dignity—as Solzhenitsyn showed us—might be a natural gift, and so we can say that historical efforts at ideological depersonalization were defeated by the indestructible greatness of who we are. Who we are *by nature* triumphed over “History.” But all bets might be off if we can actually change our nature. Our spirited resistance to biotechnological assaults on human nature cannot be viewed as merely a defense of our “natural rights.”

After all, Hobbes and Locke were clear enough that we should do what we can to change our natural condition with our comfort, security, and individual freedom in mind. In their view, our natural “gifts” are virtually worthless, and neither Hobbes nor Locke can really tell us why the transhumanist pursuit of freedom from all that we have been given is undignified. They cannot tell us why a professor, for example, has a right to resist taking a mood brightener to improve his teaching evaluations and enhance his research productivity, or why it is undignified to believe moods are just collections of chemicals in the brain

rather than indispensable, natural clues to who we really are.

So it is little wonder that the defense of human dignity started to rise to prominence after the Second World War—in, for example, the 1945 United Nations Charter and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These documents do not claim to depend on any clear consensus about why we have dignity or rights, but they sprang from a new awareness that rights are insecure without some deeper notion of dignity. Human dignity also became a special concern of the Christian Democratic parties in Europe and was the foundation for religious liberty in the Second Vatican Council. We are dignified, the Vatican Council document said, because we are open to the truth about God and the human good. The Catholic emphasis came to be on the natural dignity of the whole human person—in opposition to the modern view that our dignity resides only in our autonomy.

Christian thinkers generally began to distinguish between dignity and (the illusions of) autonomy. Secular or Kantian thinkers either identified dignity with autonomy completely or else stopped speaking of dignity at all, because it had come to mean something other than autonomy. For the Kantians, anyone with an integral view of human dignity had fallen victim to “religious prejudice” incompatible with modern scientific materialism. But our scientists actually tend to say that there is no reality that corresponds to *either* autonomy or dignity. In their view, both ideas are based upon illusions about our moral freedom.

When Leon Kass wrote *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*,¹² he was dissenting, as a scientist, from the scientific denial of dignity. He was reflecting on what he could see with his own eyes about the unique place human beings have in

nature. For most scientists, the discrediting of traditional religion has made all views of “human distinctiveness and special dignity” incredible, leaving us with the “scientific” conclusion that “[h]uman capabilities appear to differ in degree, not in kind, from those found in the higher animals.”¹³ For Kass, the inability to see the dignified difference that separates us from the chimps and the dolphins is not genuine science, but “soulless scientism.”¹⁴

The Christian thinkers and Kass agree that we have dignity, and that dignity is more than our productivity or autonomy. But their concerns about dignity differ, at least in emphasis. The Christians’ concern is for the equal dignity of all human beings against the ideological and scientific destruction of unfit or inconvenient human lives. They uphold the dignity of every human being against euthanasia, “death with dignity,” denial of equal treatment to the disabled or otherwise “unfit,” murderous eugenics, abortion, and the scientific destruction of human embryos. Actually, not all the writers in this category are Christian, and many of them show with considerable credibility that theirs is the genuinely scientific view.

The special concern of Kass and others like him is that modern biotechnology will destroy the social conditions and natural capabilities that make a dignified human life possible—a concern more classical than Christian. They hold that a large part of human dignity is living well in the acceptance of necessity, and not in the undignified effort to throw every resource into fending off death, eradicating every form of human suffering, and creating for oneself an absolutely secure environment. The dignified flourishing of human beings is based on using our natural gifts well—not in replacing natural meritocracy with techno-equality. We assault our dig-

nity, for example, when we chemically alter our memories and moods to make ourselves happy and proud without enduring relationships or any real accomplishments. These classical concerns are given a new urgency in Kass’s writing by the Nietzschean fear that we might actually be capable of transforming ourselves into contemptible “last men” living in a Brave New World of chemically induced contentment. In a certain way, Kass writes to defend the natural *inequality* of human dignity; he writes to fend off the degradation that would make absolute equality all too real.

It is perfectly possible to be alive to the concerns of both groups, and to see that human dignity, in truth, has its egalitarian and inegalitarian dimensions. But the writers in the Council’s book do mostly focus on one concern or the other.

WHY DO WE HAVE EQUAL DIGNITY?

The thoughtful evolutionary scientist Daniel Dennett, in his very positive contribution to the Council volume, says that human beings are different enough from the other animals to need morality, and he adds, contrary to Pinker, that we even need confidence in our equal dignity. He agrees with Pinker that claims for dignity have been basically Christian, and that these claims have been refuted by the scientific discovery that everything we think and do has a material cause. Our beliefs in dignity and the soul have the same status as the discredited belief in mermaids. It is no sillier to believe in a half-woman/half-fish that no one has seen than to believe in a half-body/half-soul that no one has seen.¹⁵

Dennett, however, has a scientific explanation for why we need the scientifically discredited belief in dignity. We are social animals who have brains big enough to conceive of projects that will enable us

to live purposeful lives, but there is no scientific basis for the freedom at the foundation of human conceptions of purpose. So we cannot live well without useful illusions—free will, love, dignity, etc. Even the idea that any particular human life matters at all is merely a fiction—but a fiction worth maintaining. We have seen that nihilism has all sorts of undesirable social consequences; therefore, we need to sustain these illusions in the face of what we know about our accidental, material, and evolutionary existences.

Dennett's ingenious solution to the incompatibility between scientific truth and our need for dignified belief is that we should justify our allegiance to the useful fiction of equal dignity by acknowledging the good life it makes possible. It is indispensable for the habits and trust needed to perpetuate social and political institutions. We can stop all this pointless obsessing over whether the belief is actually true by just admitting that it is not, but science can still explain why we need to believe it anyway.

Dennett's pragmatic hope that we can stop caring about whether our belief in dignity is actually true is not shared by any other author in the Council's book. In fact, the pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty had a simpler idea: let's call true whatever belief makes us happy. Rorty, of course, never called his approach dignified. Dennett himself is too dignified to deny the truth of what he thinks he knows, and there is some dignity, too, in his humane intention to spare us the consequences of a dignity-free world. It seems he denies the reality of the dignity he himself displays only because to do otherwise would require admitting that human beings are mysteriously free from nature or materialistic causation. Yet in Dennett's well-intentioned confusion, he remains stuck with acknowledging that, in some way, we are the only

species that can be held responsible for perpetuating both human nature and the very conditions of life on our planet. Is there really no dignity in *that*?

The eloquent and profound Lutheran theologian Gilbert Meilaender agrees with Dennett in his contribution that any adequate defense of equal dignity would have to be Christian. For Dennett, this means that there is nothing you can really do to make yourself dignified. For Meilaender, there is nothing you can do to make yourself undignified, because your dignity comes from God.¹⁶

Meilaender acknowledges that the limited truth of the classical view of dignity is reflected in the ways we rank people according to their excellence in life. That is why the reconciliation of equality and dignity cannot be achieved through our relationships with each other, only in our common relation to God. We are all loved by and equally distant from Him. Christianity, Meilaender claims, "caused a great rupture in Western culture...that gradually reshaped the classical notion of dignity." We cannot see our equal dignity without Christian eyes—which is not quite the same as saying "without Christian belief." There is a dim perception of the truth about the mystery of our being in anyone who reflects compassionately about our common weaknesses and limitations, especially "our common subjection to mortality." Every attempt to speak of dignity or equality in a wholly secular way leaves us disoriented, angry, and sputtering.

Meilaender means to distance himself from Kass's view that dignity depends on human agency—and thus, necessarily, on unequal human accomplishments. Kass is wrong, he claims, to say that patients who lack agency lack the capacity to display their dignity. He gives the example of the patient who patiently endures his in-

creasingly (but always) dependent condition. Such patients can be *more* dignified than Aristotle's magnanimous man—who takes pleasure in his greatness, in part, by forgetting about his natural contingency.

Kass responds that a dignified patient remains dependent on his capacity to engage in thought and action appropriate to his human situation; he is always partly patient and partly not. A pure patient—say, someone in the last stage of Alzheimer's—would be perfectly passive and so incapable of displaying his dignity. It is not so clear that, for Kass, pure patients are dignified, and that explains why he does not defend human embryos on the basis of equal dignity and equal rights. It is finally Meilaender's faith that gives him confidence that every human life has equally irreplaceable significance, so he never has to engage in deliberation about the dignity of any particular patient. But to what extent should anyone's religious faith be the basis of public policy? Part of Meilaender's response is that even our Declaration's defense of equality depends upon Christian premises.

The Roman Catholic, Augustinian political theorist Robert Kraynak agrees with Meilaender that in the genuinely Biblical view what we call our dignity is ultimately based not on our natural "essential attributes" but on God's "mysterious love" for each of us. Kraynak adds that "God's mysterious election" of each of us is what gives us an irreplaceable worth. Nothing is as important for understanding our dignity as "God's creation of each of us for special care," and that care is the basis of our loving duty to care equally and specially for each other.¹⁷

For Kraynak, neither philosophy nor science is capable of comprehending our full dignity. Science is bound to understand us impersonally or materially—as

nothing more than "physio-chemical" reactions. Philosophy understands our dignity in terms of minds alone or of minds united to bodies. So philosophy, too, is incapable of seeing each of us in our irreplaceable uniqueness. The philosophic view of the world as primarily hospitable to the human mind is, in its own way, just as opposed to the mystery of personal uniqueness as is materialistic science. Both philosophy and science reduce the "who" each of us really is to some kind of "what." As dignified "whos," we know that we are mysteriously more than we can describe, and it is that elusive dignity that should temper the pride of the scientists and philosophers in any biotechnological effort to change who we are.

Dennett's response to Kraynak is that any perception of mystery is only temporary. We will, soon enough, have a wholly materialistic explanation for all we think and do. That's good news, however, because we will then be able to perfect our use of the fiction of dignity.¹⁸ It seems to me that if dignity really is nothing more than a useful fiction, then what could protect our dignity better than a fictional theology based on a personal God who promises each unique and irreplaceable human being eternal life? Lots of people these days think that nothing matters because there is no support from God or nature for their personal experiences. Their anxious feelings of being so precariously contingent overwhelm any confidence they might have about their personal significance. The scientific hypothesis that our need for personal dignity is best served by a lie about personal theology is one that deserves more attention.

Moral philosophers Robert P. George and Patrick Lee¹⁹ seem to say in their contribution that Dennett makes dignity dependent on seeing ourselves as less than we

really are; we can see with our own eyes that our dignity is no illusion. Kraynak, meanwhile, insists on making dignity dependent on what we can see only with the eyes of faith. George and Lee, as good Catholics, surely believe in personal immortality and God's personal love for each of us, but they do not think that each person's unique dignity really depends on such beliefs.

For George, human dignity is a natural human excellence we all share. It is our "rational nature" (and not, as Kant says, our denatured reason) that elevates us, making each of us a person, not a thing, with the natural capabilities for conceptual thought, deliberation, and free choice. Each of us has what it takes to shape our lives as persons. That capacity to give moral self-direction to one's own life is worthy of "intrinsic respect"—whether or not a particular person has accomplished anything along those lines. We have dignity—and with it, absolute rights—the whole duration of our existence, because we are unique beings from the moment of our conception to our biological death. So we can never be viewed as expendable with someone else's purposes in mind. The standard of nature allows George and Lee to include Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Locke, the Declaration of Independence, and Abraham Lincoln among those who share their view.

Diana Schaub, who takes her bearings from the American Founders and Lincoln and not at all from the Bible, wonders whether there is any need to speak of dignity at all to make George and Lee's case. Our free and rational awareness of our irreplaceability and precariousness—and our natural desire to preserve ourselves—is what should condition our relationships with other human beings. We refuse to be fodder for anyone else, and the contractual relationships we form are based on the re-

ciprocal recognition of the justice of our refusals. The latest advances in science have shown that George and Lee are right to say that I am "there" from conception to natural death. Our Framers did not know enough to be able to say whether or not embryos have rights, but, Schaub reminds us, they did tell us to follow the light of science.²⁰

For Schaub, it is science—and not some Stoic or Kantian or Christian conception of dignity—that has led us to a truer understanding of what is required to protect the rights of human beings. Her objection to dignity is that it introduces questionable, meritocratic, and completely unnecessary considerations into our political discourse. So Schaub sides with Pinker on dignity but with George and Lee on the reality of natural rights.

George and Lee do concede that, according to reason, there is only a very strong case for free will, while somehow remaining scientifically certain about human dignity and human rights. Schaub is less than fully scientific when she contends that, for public policy, it is better to rely on the authority of our Framers and Lincoln than on any theoretical or religious certainty about human rights. Less than fully certain is different, of course, from basically uncertain, and the preponderance of evidence about human freedom and dignity is clearly more with Schaub and George and Lee than with Pinker and Dennett.

Meilaender and Kraynak still have reason to believe George and Lee cannot give an adequate account of who we are without accounting for the mystery of love or personal logos, for that which animates our rationality. Even Kass, in thinking about our obvious dignity as begetting and belonging animals—in thinking about how we are godlike in some ways but not in others—turns from the scientists and phi-

losophers to the superior psychology of Genesis.

THINKING ABOUT DIGNITY

This sketch of only part of the argument that animates the authors in the Council's volume on human dignity has not resolved anything for certain. The defense of liberty in our time might well depend on knowing who we really are and why we are dignified beings; it is also possible that we can get by without talking truthfully about our dignity at all. Dignity, as Dennett claims, might only be a useful fiction or, as Schaub claims, a private concern. What should be obvious is that Steven Pinker is simply wrong to claim only tyrants and fanatics believe it is time to think carefully about dignity.

It also seems clear that understanding dignity purely in terms of autonomy and productivity will render it practically impossible to choose against productivity-oriented biological enhancement. Today, we allow people to get nipped, tucked, Botoxed, and brightened—to turn themselves into patients though cosmetic surgery and cosmetic neurology—for reasons that have nothing to do with health. The patient's autonomy has come to trump even the physician's Hippocratic Oath. But why do people usually make these free and allegedly dignified choices? To enhance their personal marketability or productivity.

Our society is more meritocratic than ever. So these are the best of times to be young, smart, pretty, and industrious. But the pressure is on as never before to possess those qualities. It's no wonder that more and more people in our aging society are doing whatever it takes to avoid what seems to be the indignity, and certainly the loneliness, of looking and behaving anything less than youthfully pleasing.

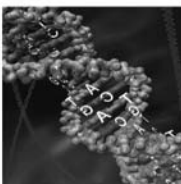
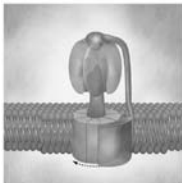
If it is an offense against autonomy to say there's something wrong with choosing *against* nature and *for* enhancement, then few may find themselves able to choose *against* enhancement *for* their natural moods, memories, or bodies. Even the most pointy-headed intellectual who actually needs to be paid won't feel himself free to choose against the mood that makes him most productive in terms of the reigning standards of quantitative assessment. If there are no natural, relational, and dignified limits to our free choices, it will increasingly seem that we have no choice, really, but to maximize our productivity.

NOTES

1. *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics* (2008). A version of this book will soon be published by the University of Notre Dame Press. I have an essay in the book—"Modern and American Dignity"—but it does not figure in the analysis here. The book also includes my "Commentary of Meilaender and Dennett," from which I have borrowed some for this article.
2. Steven Pinker, "The Stupidity of Dignity," *New Republic*, May 28, 2008.
3. See Pinker's testimony to the President's Council on Bioethics, March 6, 2003, available at www.bioethics.gov.
4. Pinker, "The Stupidity of Dignity."
5. The history of dignity presented here is indebted to the Council book as a whole, and particularly to Adam Schulman's "Bioethics and Human Dignity" and Daniel P. Sulmasy, O.F.M.'s "Dignity and Bioethics: History, Theory, and Selected Applications."
6. Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).
7. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 10.
8. Charles Rubin, "Human Dignity and the Future of Man," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*.
9. Kant, *Grounding for a Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), 40.
10. Leon R. Kass, "Defending Human Dignity," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*.

11. Susan M. Shell, "Kant's Concept of Dignity as a Resource for Bioethics," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, gives a more positive and arguably more nuanced view of Kant's possible contribution to our understanding of dignity than the one presented here.
12. Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity* (New York: Encounter Books, 2002).
13. The International Academy of Humanism's 1997 statement in defense of cloning research in higher mammals and human beings, as quoted by Leon R. Kass in "Science, Religion, and the Human Future," *Commentary*, April 2007.
14. Kass, "Science, Religion, and the Human Future."
15. Daniel C. Dennett, "How to Protect Human Dignity from Science," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*.
16. Gilbert Meilaender, "Human Dignity: Exploring and Explicating the Council's Vision," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*.
17. Robert C. Kraynak, "Human Dignity and the Mystery of the Human Soul," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*. See also Kraynak, "Commentary on Dennett," in the same volume.
18. Daniel C. Dennett, "Commentary on Kraynak," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*.
19. Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, "The Nature and Basis of Human Dignity," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*. I have attributed this argument primarily to Council member George simply because it is mainly identified with him.
20. Diana Schaub, "Commentary on Meilaender and Lawler," in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, with Schaub, "Commentary on Nussbaum, Shell, and Kass," in the same volume.

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