Dignity and Power

Biopolitics in Contemporary Literature and Philosophy

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Foreword

My sense of the rhetoric of "human dignity" is that it is subtle discourse in the service of abusive power structures. The notion of human dignity is more a function of sovereign power than a deep and abiding concept in the service of human rights. Human dignity is vital to a state-compromised liberal discourse of individual autonomy and identity to the same extent that the value of cultural and hierarchical "dignity" has long been central to the more forthrightly abusive language of national identity and social class. Egalitarian human dignity is a mere variation on the same concept that has been variously but consistently defined by power, be it the dignity that means rank and distinction or the monotheistic dignity of the human's privileged but tormented relation to her Creator. This book explores the philosophical and ethical paradoxes of a supposedly inherent human dignity that not only still needs to be proactively realized by the individual but has also to be recognized, guaranteed and protected by society. While I recognize the aspirations and the occasional effectiveness of the well-intentioned use of "human dignity" as a rhetorical tool to help disadvantaged populations, I seek to expose the underlying complicity between the notion of human dignity and a stifling power structure.

In order to capture several of the ideals that have been directly and indirectly linked to, and advanced under the rubric of, human dignity after the concept was first introduced by Immanuel Kant, I survey several fields including: human rights; ethics; moral philosophy; political science; psychology; literature and literary criticism. A general list of such dignity-based ideals includes: intrinsic human worth; personal autonomy; acting in freedom from or against animal instinct; recognition of and respect for the other and demanding the same in return; self-assertion; demotion of personal interest in favor of responsibility, altruism and sacrifice; political consciousness, action and inclusion in a political community; claiming an identity; the need for creativity, originality, and authenticity. Based on this accumulative meaning, I

argue that human dignity, in all its formulations, is a discourse that misrepresents the meaning of empowerment for modern citizens as they become interested more in political gestures and less in material profit. Running through most of the book is a continuing effort to correct Giorgio Agamben's response to Michel Foucault's question about how the modern state endows its citizen with a political subjectivity and individuality and, by the same gesture, subjects him to a totalized system. I argue that it is the discourse of human dignity that makes possible a superficially individuated, but subtly and ultimately totalized, culture. This project also demonstrates, sometimes in a counter-intuitive way, how some of the ideals within the discourse of human dignity have worked in accord with nationalist, racist and other dangerous world views.

While my interdisciplinary approach interrogates how writers from different disciplines either question or reinforce the discourse of human dignity, the bulk of this research is focused on works of fiction. For, the literary text, while it can at times be as subject as other forms of text to discursive constraints, still has more potential to break through dominant discourse. The poetic is more likely than the philosophical to offer alternatives to conventional thinking about ethics and human rights. Moreover, fiction can be a better venue for examining how discourse works. Fiction can rely on a default exemption from history, and this complacency results in less careful concealment of discursive traces. Therefore some fictions question the discourse of human dignity, even as others are caught within this discourse. In this light, I argue that South African-Australian novelist and Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee's fiction subverts the discourse of human dignity while Japanese-British novelist and Nobel Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro's work is still enmeshed in that discourse. There are several reasons for my choice of these two novelists.

Coetzee's novels are written over a period spanning the height of apartheid and its aftermath. As somebody who has taken a strong stance against the racist cruelties of apartheid at home and against perceived injustice worldwide, Coetzee is evidently no apologist for systems of

abuse. In his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society in 1987, Coetzee denounced apartheid as an artificial system that produced "deformed and stunted relations between human beings." Yet, his views on the ethical value of human dignity draw a great deal of validity from his historical circumstance. For, when a white South African novelist with top literary prestige questions the value of human dignity, he stands the risk of trivializing the suffering of human beings under colonialism, apartheid, and their still painful aftermath. Due to this risk, Coetzee's criticism of the ideals encompassed within the discourse of human dignity is based on deliberate and careful thought and not on unquestioned sentiment.

Ishiguro's historical and geographical coordinates, also, are relevant to his position in relation to the discourse of human dignity. The novelist was born in Japan, but he has lived in England since the age of six, was educated in England, and writes in English. Both Japan and England, as it happens, are associated with a certain self-image or national character of "dignity"—not "human dignity" but social characteristics such as reticence, restraint, loyalty to tradition, etc. Consequently, Ishiguro's fiction, aiming to replace the traditional dignity of custom, finds itself entangled in the more subtle and pervasive discourse of human dignity. Ishiguro uses the power of his narratives to bring his characters out of the unconscious dignity of norm and into a conscious struggle to realize their personal autonomy and adopt particular identities. The combination of their geographical non-centrality and Nobel-recognition allows Coetzee and Ishiguro to afford me a considerable degree of representation to work with and interrogate.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Kantian Dignity and Its Discontents

Kantian Dignity

The concept of "dignity" has historically evolved from a point when it referred to social prestige and elevation in public status to a modern sense that indicates autonomous personhood and intrinsic human worth. As far back as Latin jurist Cicero and the Emperor Augustus, "dignity" was used to indicate official office, rank or authority. With the Abrahamic tradition, dignity came to be associated with the sanctity of the human who is made in God's image. But, in the modern period the concept of dignity has been most closely associated with Immanuel Kant, who offered the first, supposedly non-theological, conception of a "universal" and "egalitarian" *human dignity*.

In his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant wrote that "man and generally any rational being *exists* as an end in himself, *not merely as a means* to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end" (56). Kant's "practical imperative will be as follows: So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only" (57). For Kant, human dignity means that the human being has intrinsic worth that no one can put a price on because it is not tied to the relative utility or benefit of that person to others: "everything has either Value or Dignity. Whatever has a value can be replaced by something else which is *equivalent*; whatever, on the other hand, is above all value, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity … , an intrinsic worth" (64-5). Man's dignity also means rising above "all laws of physical nature, and obeying those only which he himself gives, and by which his maxims can belong to a system of

universal law, to which at the same time he submits himself … *Autonomy* then is the basis of the dignity of the human" (66). Kant speaks of "the *dignity* of any rational being, obeying no law but that which he himself gives" (64). This rational autonomy from the dictates of instinct is essential to what Kant calls "pure reason." In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), while suggesting that the autonomous will freely legislating for itself might be in fact a product of nature, Kant argues that the human being ought to separate his judgment from, and elevate it over, instinct and mere survival mechanisms that he shares with other living beings:

> [The human] is yet not so completely an animal as to be indifferent to everything that reason says for itself and to use it merely as an instrument for the satisfaction of his needs as a sensuous being. For the fact he has reason would not elevate [the human] in value above mere animality at all if he used reason only for the sake of that which instinct accomplishes in animals: it would then only be a particular way that nature had made use of in order to equip man for the same end which it had made the vocation of animals, without giving him a higher end for his vocation. Given his natural constitution, he no doubt has reason in order to take account of his weal and woe, but he also has it for a higher purpose, not merely to take into consideration what is in itself good and evil, about which pure, not sensuously interested reason alone can judge, but rather to distinguish entirely the judgment of reason [from sensuously interested judgment] and to make it the highest condition of the latter. (61-2)

The notion of "human dignity" emerges from Kant's thought, then, with at least four implications: 1) a human being has inherent and absolute worth that is not contingent on social, economic, or material factors; 2) a human being is an autonomous subject who authors and follows his or her own, universally applicable, ethical code; 3) human beings possess the faculty of reason that should shape their moral conduct in freedom from animal instinct and legal norm; 4) every human being has the right to be treated as a person with inherent worth and bears the responsi-

bility to treat others on the same principle. In the Kantian formulation, therefore, human dignity is a universal and egalitarian quality of all human beings, who are still superior to other living beings (a continuation of the religious tradition); human beings must recognize their own dignity and that of others. Kantian dignity, consequently, has proven to be the most persistent term in the discourse of rights and responsibilities governing human interaction.

The notion of human dignity has evidently been embraced and emphasized by twentieth-century constitutions and declarations. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) opens with the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." Countries that have witnessed gross crimes on racial and economic grounds are particularly attached to the notion of human dignity. Article 10 in the Bill of Rights section of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996), for example, is unequivocal in asserting an inherent human dignity and the connection of such dignity with entitlement to rights: "Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected."

The persistent allure of Kantian dignity has several explanations. The most evident one is that human dignity appears to be a minimal or threshold ethical concept. Subscription to the minimal character of dignity can be seen in the work of moral philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty proposes his vision of an ethical person, whom he terms the "liberal ironist," who recognizes that "what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but *just* susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans—humiliation" (92). Rorty sees resentment of humiliation as the special and morally significant characteristic that unites humanity. While we can see here a commonality with Kantian dignity, this conception—in its insistence on the distinction from animals—does not vary much from earlier views of dignity either, views rooted in theology and social hierarchy. Martha Nussbaum also insists on the indispensable and minimal character of dignity even as she argues that

shame has no role in a liberal democracy. Her legal vision is very protective of the notion of human dignity, whose cultivation she considers one of "the most basic obligations of a liberal state" (386). Nussbaum draws a line in the sand around dignity by arguing that "a minimally just and decent society would provide all its citizens with a minimum threshold amount of certain key opportunities" (283). One such opportunity is the "capability" to possess "the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others" (283). Nussbaum asserts dignity as a key legal value despite its murky philosophical basis. Although it is not clear at first sight, dignity—in these specific situations and in public debate generally—is for Nussbaum a *forensic* term, at home in the *legal* discourse of rights/claims and suited to litigation.

Recent debate on the meaning and value of human dignity has focused on contrasting the view that society should *recognize* the dignity of individuals by treating them as ends rather than as means, as opposed to the *agency* view that stresses the individual's own act of *claiming* dignity. The latter association—of dignity with the act of claiming rights—is often attributed to Joel Feinberg, who also stresses the minimal nature of dignity as an ethical term:

Having rights, of course, makes claiming possible; but it is claiming that gives rights their special moral significance. This feature of rights is connected in a way with the customary rhetoric about what it is to be a human being. Having rights enables us to "stand up like men," to look others in the eye, and to feel in some fundamental way the equal of anyone. To think of oneself as the holder of rights is not to be unduly but properly proud, to have that minimal self-respect that is necessary to be worthy of the love and esteem of others. Indeed, respect for a person may simply be respect for their rights, so that there cannot be the one without the other; and what is called "human dignity" may simply be the recognizable capacity to assert claims. (252)

Feinberg places clear "moral significance" in the capacity to possess, claim, and assert rights; and he conceives of human dignity as indistinguishable from such a capacity.

Such attempts to link dignity to minimal requirements might explain also why dignity has persisted in rights discourse even though related ideals such as 'honor," "merit" and "self-fulfillment" have faded in recent deliberations on issues of social justice. According to Alan Gewirth, "self-fulfillment" has experienced "diminution of concern in much of modern moral and political philosophy … as a reaction to the seemingly elitist focus of many ideals of the good life" (4). Moral philosophers have grown less interested in individual attainment of the good life and more focused rather on interpersonal duties and obligations. These duties supposedly cater to "moderate or even minimal but indispensable needs rather than the superlative fulfillment of aspirations and capacities" (4). As we can see in Rorty, Nussbaum and Feinberg, dignity has become accepted as a minimal requirement and, hence, it needs to be asserted by the individual, society and the state. Human dignity has become a matter of responsibility to oneself and to others. Nevertheless, the reasoning behind the place of dignity in the culture of human rights has not gone without questioning.

Existing Criticisms of Kantian Dignity

The humanist tradition has widely embraced the concept of dignity, so much so that the "idea has been weakened less by counterargument than by being so invariably honored in speech that it is now cliché" (Tinder 238). This embrace continues even though almost two centuries ago Schopenhauer made a sharp and convincing critique of the concept. In *On The Basis of Morality* (1840), he offers a "positive" ethical theory as an alternative to Kant's artificial ethics, specifically targeting "human dignity" which "once it was uttered by Kant, became the shibboleth of all confused and empty-headed moralists … supposing cleverly enough that their readers would be so pleased to see themselves invested with such a 'dignity' that they would be quite satisfied" (97). For Schopenhauer, the philosophical use of Kantian dignity is both deceptive and condescending: "this 'dignity' is made to rest solely on man's autonomy, and to lie in the fact that the law which he ought to obey is his own work, his relation to it thus being the same as that of the subjects of

a constitutional government to their statutes" (97). More importantly, Schopenhauer notes that, despite its secular façade, "human dignity" is a theological aftertaste because it has no material or natural basis; it is extremely hard, he argues, to imagine "a man, possessed, as it were, by a *daemon*, in the form of an absolute Ought, that speaks only in Categorical Imperatives, and, confronting his wishes and inclinations, claims to be the perpetual controller of his actions" (97). Even if we are able to imagine this "figure," what we see is "no true portrait of human nature, or of our inner life; what we do discern is an artificial substitute for theological Morals, to which it stands in the same relation as a wooden leg to a living one" (97).

Ranjana Khanna calls human dignity into question on both philosophical and ethical grounds. She argues that "even though it appears as a byproduct of the categorical imperative to treat every human as an end and not a means," in Kant's ethics "human dignity is [still] a categorical imperative" in itself (57). Eleni Coundouriotis also points to the blind-spot problem plaguing the position of dignity in the discourse of human rights:

> Although dignity is a foundational concept of human rights, it has a peculiar position in the discourse because it rarely elicits a critical examination. As a result, dignity is pushed to the margins; it is seen either as synonymous with humanity and hence a starting point for elaborating a theory of rights, or as the ultimate expression of rights realized. Occupying this place at the beginning or the end of the human rights narrative, dignity is rarely part of a discussion of process. (843)

The use of human dignity as a discursive tool also changes depending on the historical moment. We can see that in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's "notion (developed specifically to facilitate the post-apartheid transition) that it has the power to restore the dignity that has been stolen by the illegitimate regime of apartheid" (Coundouriotis 847). In post-apartheid Africa, it is more convenient to think of dignity as something that can be *restored*. On the other hand, at a

different historical point, the *African Charter on Human and People's Rights* (1981) would claim in its preamble that victims of racism are yet to *attain*, rather than *restore*, their dignity; Africans "are still struggling for their dignity."

The fact that Kantian dignity is based on personal autonomy is also the object of critique, as several problems arise when we begin to consider the background of this autonomous subject. Drucilla Cornell notes how Kantian dignity is posited as "the moral mandate in which all of us are viewed as subjects who, in principle, can articulate their desire as well as morally evaluate their ends … Indeed, much political philosophy takes it for granted that we act as actively desiring subjects who simply shape our own lives" (144). Cornell reminds us of the feminist grievance that it was easy for theorists "to make this assumption because the subjects in the purview of the theory were not all human beings, but straight white men of a certain class background" (144). While moral philosophy continues to discuss dignity on the premise that we all are autonomous subjects, we should be cognizant of misgivings about such an assumption and see that "self" and "subjectivity" are not so readily and equally recognized across cultures and disciplines.

Although it is based on a clear demarcation of the self, dignity continues to elude deconstruction a generation after poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques have destabilized the sovereign, homogenous subject and revealed it as porous and fluid. Ethical projects that emphasize dignity are strangely out of step with current theoretical trends. In her examination of the use of "dignity" in Cornell's *Legacies of Dignity: between Women and Generations*, Sarah Murphy questions the "claims for the autonomy of the female subject" that are "vital to a feminist project" and looks instead for a Lacanian constitution of the subject in a "heteronomy, a relation to otherness" (158-59). Murphy asks, "What has become of Kantian dignity in the process of being Lacanized? Or more precisely, to what extent can Kant's dignity, which relies so intently on a rational, autonomous subject in so many ways not the subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis, survive this analysis?" (158). Ranjana Khanna points to the possibility that dignity perhaps plays the crucial part in

resistance to the deconstruction of the autonomous subject: "If Jacques Derrida claimed in 'Force of Law' that the term *justice* is undeconstructible and, more controversially, that justice is deconstruction, it would seem that in current usage *dignity* is held in high esteem and becomes the source of indignant defense of the subject and resistance to the questioning of its boundaries" (45). She draws attention to several terms that repeatedly stall "radical questioning of the constitution of the subject in contemporary discourse, and these seem to be underpinned by dignity—like identity in politically oriented work, the body in political critiques, or the selfsame in philosophical paradigms. Many of these seem to take dignity as their crucial underpinning" (45). Several philosophical disciplines have recognized the philosophical value of recent theory that downplays subjective autonomy, accentuates intersubjective experience and troubles the self/other binary. Hence, a moral philosophy of dignity, in that it continues to rely on a sovereign subject, can be understood as a reactionary resistance to deconstructive analysis.

Hannah Arendt: Human Dignity as Political Action

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt rejects the idea that human rights are based on the notion of an intrinsic human dignity:

> The concept of human rights can again be meaningful only if they are redefined as a right to the human condition itself, which depends upon some belonging to some human community, the right never to be dependent upon some inborn human dignity which *de facto*, aside from its guarantee by fellow men, not only does not exist but is the last and possibly most arrogant myth we have invented in all our long history. (439)

Throughout its dark history, Arendt argues, "the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human" (295). For Arendt, human rights do not have a divine or natural basis: "human rights are civil rights: they are based on forms of human action, not a set of moral truths about the laws of God or nature. It is as political, not legal, actors

that we are granted rights" (51). Arendt notes that the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) makes human rights dependent on civic rights; it is only citizens who can count on the protection of the law and who can expect their dignity to be respected. A general characterization of Arendt's position, offered by Andrew Norris, is that "the direct defense of human rights will alone be insufficient. By her account what is needed is rather a recognition of the ultimate basis of civil rights—what she terms the 'right to have rights.' This right Arendt finds in political action" (Norris 51). Seranah Parekh argues that Arendt "disparages" a mode of living where the human does not attempt to affirm dignity through participation in public discourse: "Arendt wants people to have the possibility of transforming themselves from mere givenness (*zoē*) into individuals with unique identities (*bios*); that transformation is only possible through acting and speaking with others in a public space" (39). This political action Arendt terms *praxis*.

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt takes *praxis* from the Greek verbs, *archein* and *prattein*, "to begin" and "to perform" respectively; as co-acting creators, people "begin" and "perform" together, thereby expressing their otherwise incommunicable identities. To engage in *Praxis* is to be politically engaged and conscious, a *worldly* human expressing one's individual identity and distinction, as opposed to the *worldless animal laboran* "imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfillment of his own needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate" (119). Arendt's politics, therefore, place the ideals of dignity ahead of the empirical realm that concerns itself with economics and administrative matters. The politics Arendt aspires to is a form of public space where individuals assert and express themselves under conditions of mutual respect and recognition. For Arendt, then, while human dignity is not the natural basis of human rights, the achievement of dignity is the *telos* of political action.

The form of political consciousness that Arendt calls for is to be distinguished from scientific and factual knowledge. When I refer to consciousness throughout this book, I mean knowledge of and concern with political and social issues that have no tangible impact and profit

for the individual. I do not mean scientific and factual knowledge. In fact, attention to scientific knowledge can be opposed by some to the human dignity that liberates the mind from attachment to instrumental detail and frees it up for loftier human aspirations. Such an attitude could be a continuation from an earlier form of dignity that Francis Bacon noted in his *Novum Organum* (1620) when he spoke of "the opinion, or inveterate conceit, which is both vainglorious and prejudicial, namely that the dignity of the human mind is lowered by long and frequent intercourse with experiments and particulars, which are objects of sense and confined to matter" (31).

Human Dignity as the Hidden Link between Subject-Formation and Subjection

My own critique of human dignity targets all visions of the concept that have accumulated so far. In the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate that the notion of human dignity, in all its formulations, is a way of nudging the human being out of her mere "givenness" (animality, instinct) and into acts of political self-assertion and physical self-sacrifice. This contradictory combination of self-assertion and self-sacrifice makes the core of a deeply flawed understanding of power on the part of "subjects" who become interested more in gesture than profit, who willingly discipline themselves and forego any life outside political action. The modern state, in my view, uses empty and contradictory tokens of human dignity to promote a superficially individuated, but subtly and ultimately totalized, culture. Therefore, I argue, the notion of human dignity (whether it is seen as the beginning or end of rights) is the basis of subject-formation and the modern seal of subjection to sovereign power.

Much of Michel Foucault's work focuses on analyzing the connection between the constitution of the subject and the formation of the state, the link between technologies of the self and technologies of government. Foucault distinguishes two meanings in the word *subject*: a person being "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own

identity by a conscience or self knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" ("Subject" 212). Foucault attempted to demonstrate that the *modern* sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual facilitated each other's emergence. Yet, there remains a gap in Foucault's analysis, a gap that has been observed, but, I argue, not adequately closed. As Giorgio Agamben points out in *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), "Foucault argues that the modern Western state has integrated techniques of subjective individuation with procedures of objective totalization … Yet the point at which these two faces of power converge remains strangely unclear in Foucault's work, so much so that it has even been claimed that Foucault would have consistently refused to elaborate a unitary theory of power" (6). Agamben continued Foucault's examination of the biopolitical state in an attempt to locate where individuation and totalization intersect and to expand and resolve Foucault's unanswered question of why the modern state—which, in Agamben's words, incorporated "bare life" or *zoē* (natural life) into *bios* (political life), made *zoē* its main concern by caring for the population's health—did not protect *zoē* from destruction.

Agamben attempts t*o correct or, at least, complete* Foucault's thesis that modern politics is characterized by including *zoē* into the polis and making it the object of state power by arguing:

> [T]he decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested. When its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order, the one

> place for both the organization of state power and emancipation from it. Everything happens as if, along with the disciplinary process by which State power makes man as a living being into its own specific object, another process is set in motion that in large measure corresponds to the birth of modern democracy, in which man as a living being presents himself no longer as an object but as the subject of political power. (*Homo* 8-9).

Agamben's use of "bare life" has continued to confuse. In the last issue of *Theory & Event*, which opens with a symposium responding to the tenth anniversary of the English language publication of *Homo Sacer*, Daniel McLoughlin writes of "the difficulty that is particularly evident in the ambiguous role that 'bare life' plays in *Homo Sacer*. While the term principally refers to life that is excluded from the protection of the law, Agamben often also refers to bare life as zoe, natural or nutritive life." For Agamben, western politics brings "living man" (or woman) into the "polis" by separating him from "his bare life and, at the same time," maintaining him "in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (*Homo* 8). In other words, humans gain political rights and protection (*bios*), in other words become political subjects, when they are rescued by the modern state from their *zoē* (their mere givenness), but, since exclusion works only through inclusion, humans bring their *zoē* within them. Therefore, for Agamben, humans become the object of "sovereign violence" because of the kernel of *zoē* inside them that they have not really lost even though they took on political characters, and this *zoē* makes them the object of "sovereign violence" (118). Man's surviving *zoē*, in this formulation, trumps his political life and subjects him to power. Man's *zoē*, in Agamben's complex way, is the source of his woe.

Agamben argues that "the existence of this line of thinking seems to be logically implicit in Foucault's work" but says that "it remains a blind spot to the eye of the researcher, or rather something like a vanishing point that the different lines of Foucault's inquiry (and, more generally, of the entire Western reflection on power) converge toward without reaching" (7). I disagree with Agamben on how the biopolitical process of subject-formation and subjection—to which human dignity is essential—works.

Correcting and Adding to Agamben's Thesis

My argument is that the biopolitical state makes *zoē* the exclusive domain of the sovereign while the citizen turns herself into absolute *bios*, an exclusively political life. Modern democracy turns human life into citizen life—"way of life" or *bios*—and in this sense what makes man the object of violence is his *bios*, his lack of any *zoē* that is not way of life. The modern state does not turn all its citizens into mere *zoē* but opts to endow them all with an exclusively political life in the token of universal, egalitarian, politically conscious dignity. Hence, man as a "living being" cannot present himself as a "subject of political power"; he can only do so as a political being, and it is this very (political) presentation that makes man the willing object of sovereign power. The uncontested place of dignity in the "modern discourse" of human rights, therefore, marks the centrality not of bare life but of political life to the mechanism of the biopolitical state. The dignity-bearing citizen is the object of violence by virtue of his attachment to the empty token of human dignity, his mere political life.

Agamben's complex exclusion/inclusion thesis attempts to "return thought to its practical calling" (*Homo* 6). My "unitary theory of power" offers dignity as an alternative to Agamben's explanation of sovereignty in a complex and obtuse mechanism of exclusion/inclusion, an explanation that cannot have any practical use. I argue that the discourse of human dignity—premised as it is on the notion of a subject, be it autonomous or heteronymous—is the ultimate technology of the self; dignity, after all, means self-control and self-respect, concepts that reflect one's standing in a community. The discourse of human dignity is a function of subjectification—the creation of dignity-bearing subjects who are subjected to power. Thinking in terms of a discourse of dignity should also help us see sovereignty in a new light.

Defining a concept in symmetrical terms can be misleading, and such an approach might sound particularly futile when applied to a question as perennial as the question of empowerment. Nevertheless, it is a good start to make the obvious argument that power is the exact opposite

of non-power. What is less obvious about this diametrical relation between power and non-power is that, for at least some people some of the time, the vision is reversed. It is of the nature of power that what we see as power is exactly non-power and vice versa; power is masked that way. Hence, the harder we strive for empowerment, the more firmly we are subjected to sovereign power. This debilitating reversal essential to power is brought about almost exclusively by our attachment to human dignity. The ideals and aspirations that come under the rubric of human dignity are the opposite of all the manifestations of sovereign power. Noting this reversal brings us to the ultimate contradiction in the way human dignity is deployed in discourse: it is safe to argue that affirming egalitarian dignity means restoring to the "common man" such attributes as have long been the exclusive domain of "Man." The ethics of human dignity envisions a human who is conscious of her place in the world, self-assertive, responsible, responsive, seeking recognition of her noble or human status, i.e. politically alive. But, sovereignty is unconscious, irresponsible, irresponsive, beyond recognition, i.e. politically dead.

In *The Sovereign and the Beast* lecture series at the University of Chicago, Derrida emphasizes the "motif of the 'response' which one finds at work in the exclusion of the "beast" from the social "convention" at the origin of the state (56). In theories of the state, the "animal" is excluded from the social contract because it cannot "respond" (56). Derrida argues that for Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Lacan, "the most powerful, impassive, and dogmatic prejudice about the animal did not consist in saying that it does not communicate, that it does not signify, and that it has no sign at its disposal, but that it does not respond" (57). This exclusion leads Derrida to conclude that the "sovereign," in a sense, is "like the beast" since he "does not respond, that in any case we cannot be assured of his acceptance, we cannot count on his response" (57). It is the absolute nature of sovereignty that "unbinds it from all duty of reciprocity. The sovereign … has the right to a certain irresponsibility" (57). In this light, the sovereign looks "stupid," looks "even like the death he carries within him, like that death that Levinas says is not nothingness, nonbeing, but nonresponse" (57). It hardly warrants emphasizing

that the exclusion of bestial irresponsibility—an exclusion essential to the sovereign state—has culminated in modernity with the concept of "*human* dignity." Of course, this irresponsible bestiality is eliminated from the citizen of the sovereign state, not from the sovereign state itself.

Agamben, also, points out the implication of "responsibility" in state-sanctioned discourse. Cautioning against the "tacit confusion of ethical categories and juridical categories," he writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive* (1999) that "categories that we use in moral and religious judgments are in some way contaminated by law: guilt, responsibility, innocence, judgment, pardon" (18). Hence, dignity accounts for the inherent contradiction in a struggle that purports to empower and liberate the common man—to make him sovereign himself—but, simultaneously, condemns him to a system of obligations, of rights and responsibilities. Derrida does not think that man can escape sovereign power, but were that to happen, were man to be really free, he speculates "it would be so much *like* this expropriating ecstasy of irresponsibility, like this place of nonresponse that is commonly and dogmatically called bestiality, divinity, death" (*Sovereign* 57). I argue that human dignity—first conceived by Kant as man's ethical detachment from his sensuous interest and then tied by Arendt to the necessity of political action—makes it impossible for man to be irresponsible, free and sovereign because it trims his *zoē*, his bestiality, and leaves him with the shell of *bios*. Power works in such a way that the thing we value most (our dignity) is what makes us least sovereign; the mode of life that repels us most is the mode that is characteristic of absolute freedom and power.

Dignity and Political Violence

The dignity-oriented subject's reversed understanding of power makes her a direct target of political violence, not sovereign violence. So far I have avoided the phrase "sovereign violence" (except when I am quoting Agamben) because, I argue, there is no such thing as sovereign violence: sovereignty or absolute power evinces no violence because

it would not be absolute power if it had to. Violence ensues from the dignity-oriented *struggle* for power that always draws on one or more of the ideals under the rubric of dignity. So, a dignity-conscious, responsible humanity playing by the terms defined for it by an irresponsible power generates and receives its own violence, a violence from which sovereign power, which has preserved its natural state, is protected by its very irresponsibility.

Examining the place of dignity in theories of revolution puts this argument in more concrete terms. I argue that the goal of revolt (violent or otherwise), when it is necessary, should be the achievement of more material prosperity and comfort and less physical violence and abuse. The discourse of dignity, however, muddies up that process; this discourse presents living in a "democracy" and even just "fighting" for democracy as ends in themselves. The dignity-oriented mentality is more interested in the gesture of political struggle rather than in what material difference such struggle makes in people's lives. Frances Fukuyama, for instance, believes that it is the citizen's desire for recognition of his or her dignity, not for welfare, that is the basis of liberal democracy and warns that an erosion of that aspiration can bring about the downfall of liberal democracy. In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama explains that the "Hegelian understanding of the meaning of contemporary liberal democracy differs in a significant way from the Anglo-Saxon understanding that was the theoretical basis of liberalism in countries like Britain and the United States" (xviii). For people like "Hobbes, Locke, and the American Founding Fathers like Jefferson and Madison," a system of government based on rights and freedom was a means to an end (xviii). They saw that "rights to a large extent existed as a means of preserving a private sphere where men can enrich themselves and satisfy the desiring parts of their souls" (xviii). In other words, it is a pragmatic view of what political action is meant to achieve. Hence, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, "the prideful quest for recognition was to be subordinated to enlightened self-interest—desire combined with reason—and particularly the desire for self-preservation of the body" (xviii). In the Anglo-Saxon formulation, this summary suggests, revolution takes place for the sake of material

gain and protection from tyranny, and not for the sake of triumphalism and proud self-assertion.

According to Fukuyama, the Hegelian tradition, on the other hand, views "rights as ends in themselves, because what truly satisfies human beings is not so much material prosperity as recognition of their status and dignity" (xviii). As summed up by Fukuyama, the Hegelian view posits prestige as the purpose of political action:

> With the American and French revolutions, Hegel asserted that history comes to an end because the longing that had driven the historical process—the struggle for recognition—has now been satisfied in a society characterized by universal and reciprocal recognition. No other arrangement of human social institutions is better able to satisfy this longing, and hence no further progressive historical change is possible. (xviii)

According to Fukuyama, "Communism is being superseded by liberal democracy in our time because of the realization that the former provides a gravely defective form of recognition" (xix). Fukuyama's hypothesis about the end of history heralded by the triumph of liberal democracy is more in sync with the Hegelian view: he "finds in Hegel a more profound understanding of human nature than can be gleaned from the ideas of such philosophers as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who privileged self-preservation above recognition" (Griffiths 91). He argues that while "[d]esire and reason are together sufficient to explain the process of industrialisation, and a large part of economic life more generally," these two qualities alone "cannot explain the striving for liberal democracy, which ultimately arises out of *thymos*, the part of the soul that demands recognition" (Fukuyama xviii). With improvement in the material quality of life, "people begin to demand not simply more wealth but recognition of their status": people, for Fukuyama, do not strive for material comfort alone for if they did, "they would be content to live in market-oriented authoritarian states like Franco's Spain, or a South Korea or Brazil under military rule" (xviii). Human beings have "a thymotic pride in their own self-worth, and this leads them to

demand democratic governments that treat them like adults rather than children, recognizing their autonomy as free individuals" (xviii).

Fukuyama borrows the figure of the "last man" in his title from Nietzsche, who scorned the Anglo-Saxon vision of liberal democracy and did not see a world without dignity as a human world:

> Nietzsche believed that modern democracy represented not the self-mastery of former slaves, but the unconditional victory of the slave and a kind of slavish morality. The typical citizen of a liberal democracy was a "last man" who, schooled by the founders of modern liberalism, gave up prideful belief in his or her own superior worth in favor of comfortable self-preservation. Liberal democracy produced "men without chests," composed of desire and reason but lacking *thymos*, clever at finding new ways to satisfy a host of petty wants … The last man had no desire to be recognized as greater than others, and without such desire no excellence or achievement was possible. Content with his happiness and unable to feel any sense of shame for being unable to rise above those wants, the last man ceased to be human. (xxii)

Fukuyama uses this dystopian "last man" that liberal democracy can produce to caution us that a lack of dignity can cause the demise of liberal democracy itself.

The role dignity plays in reversing the way power is understood can also be seen in such cases where sovereign power can rest on a dignity associated with revolution and creative violence while at the same time using dignity to block these very same potentialities. First, let us see how sovereign authority, particularly in the modern period, is based on the sanctity and prestige of revolutionary violence. In the Roman and medieval traditions, Agamben argues in *State of Exception* (2005), the "syntagma *force of law* … has the generic sense of efficacy, the capacity to bind. But only in the modern epoch, in the context of the French Revolution, does it begin to indicate the supreme value of those state acts declared by the representative assemblies of the people" (37). In

other words, in modernity, "force of law" means respect and awe for the law, for the law now has a revolutionary mystique. This modern law is written with the blood of martyrs, brought into existence through patriotic sacrifice. Furthermore, it *appears* democratic—creatively formulated and adopted by the people.

On the other hand, dignity—acquired through an image of popular revolt and violence—becomes the very means of preserving the power status quo and forestalling innovation and change. Walter Benjamin's distinction between "constituting" power and "constituted" power is helpful here. Benjamin, according to Agamben, "presented the relation between constituting power and constituted power as the relation between the violence that posits law and the violence that preserves it" (*Homo* 40). Both forms of violence are part of a circular schema: law-positing violence (revolutionary, radical violence) becomes part of the law-preserving violence (the law-enforcing state). Agamben notes: "If constituting power is, as the violence that posits law, certainly more noble than the violence that preserves it, constituting power still possesses no title that might legitimate something other than the law-preserving violence and even maintains an ambiguous and ineradicable relationship with constituted power" (*Homo* 40). Benjamin sees this hopeless circularity reflected in the work of representative bodies:

> If the awareness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the juridical institution decays. An example of this is provided today by the parliaments. They present such a well-known, sad spectacle because they have not remained aware Kof the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence … They lack a sense of the creative violence of law that is represented in them. One need not then be surprised that they do not arrive at decisions worthy of this violence, but instead oversee a course of political affairs that avoids violence through compromise. (qtd. in Agamben, *Homo* 28)

Benjamin laments the fact that legal institutions never remain faithful to their violent, democratic roots.

My argument, however, goes a step further; it is only to the extent that such institutions of sovereign power represent themselves constantly as attuned to their revolutionary beginnings that they hold on to the dignity that in turn guarantees their survival. Agamben's characterization of revolutionary violence as "certainly more noble than the violence that preserves" the existing law betrays the role I see dignity playing in this paradoxical relation between the two forms of law. The "noble" badge gives the creative violence immunity and turns it into an untouchable violence. Article Three of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* states that "sovereignty resides essentially in the Nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation." Article Twelve states that "security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are, therefore, established for the good of all and not for the personal advantage of those to whom they shall be intrusted." The popular force that bestows mystique on this declaration then places force exclusively in sovereign power. The dignity of violence in a back-handed way shields sovereignty from potential violence.

The "Uncomfortable Paradox": Human Dignity and Dangerous Worldviews

In "The Two Western Cultures of Privacy: Dignity versus Liberty," James Q. Whitman shows how the Nazis invoked dignity to unify Germans and exclude others. He presents the "uncomfortable paradox" that connects Nazism and dignity in concrete legal and political terms (1166). Whitman makes a clear distinction between an American vision of privacy based on liberty (protection against state intervention) and a continental version based on dignity (protection against violations of personal honor). He dismisses the assertion that "contemporary continental dignity is the product of a reaction against fascism," the view that "Europe has dignity today because Europe was traumatized seventy years ago" (1165). After tracing the value of dignity back to monarchical and hierarchical norms that protect persons with high status and to the restrictive social discipline of dueling and etiquette, Whitman arrives at

the question of how the right to personal dignity became the "universal" right of every citizen of the state; he argues that "much of this leveling up took place *during* the fascist period, for fascist politics involved precisely the promise that all members of the nation-state would be equal in 'honor'—that all racial Germans, for example, would be masters" (1166). In "On Nazi 'Honour' and the New European 'Dignity'," Whitman questions the "commonplace" that "the European embrace of the values of 'dignity,' and 'dignity's imposing cousin, 'human dignity' … is founded on a forthright rejection of the fascist past" (243). The "Nazi ideology of honour" promised "that all Germans would be better than somebody else. The promise, which turned out to be murderous, was integral to the making of a Nazi dignitary order" (265). For Whitman, this premise is consistent with "a paradox in 'dignity' itself, as 'dignity' plays itself out in the realities of human psychological and social structures" (265). People "of good will like to talk, in our Kantianized post-war world, as though 'dignity' were something that could easily be extended to all humans," but in reality human "societies often rest on distinctions of status. For most people, most of the time, the promise of 'dignity' is accordingly a promise that they will be regarded as better than somebody else" (265). Someone might still argue that a distinction has to be made between this hierarchical form of recognition (one for which a different word than dignity has to be used—perhaps "honor") and a better form of recognition that is worthy of the word "dignity."

Charles Taylor makes such a distinction, yet he does not sever the tie between the notion of dignity and the dangerous politics I have explored above. Taylor starts with a distinction between two kinds of recognition: on the one hand, "*honor* in the *ancient regime* … is intrinsically linked to inequalities. For some to have honor in this sense, it is essential that not everyone have it"; on the other, we have "the modern notion of dignity now used in a universalist and egalitarian sense, where we talk of the inherent 'dignity of the human being', or of citizen dignity … that everyone shares … It is obvious that this concept of dignity is the only one compatible with a democratic society" (320). The novelty of Taylor's distinction lies in his argument that, while honor is connected with social position, dignity as a democratic principle is connected with

"identity." In the context of his commentary on the issue of multiculturalism, Taylor argues that the new respect for "human dignity" coincides with interest in the notions of *originality* and *authenticity* by people like Herder: originality indicates "a certain way of being human that is *my* way" and "authenticity" means "being true to my own originality" (322). This new ideal "accords moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature" (322). In light of this coincidence, respect for human dignity, or treating the human as an end in himself, means respecting his authentic way of being human.

Yet, ironically, this latter conception of dignity can be as serious an inspiration for dangerous world views as the concept of "honor." Taylor notes that "Herder applied his conception of originality at two levels, not only to the individual person among other persons, but also to the culture-bearing people among other peoples. Just like individuals, a *Volk* should be true to itself, that is, its own culture" (322). Taylor, needlessly, directs us to "recognize here the seminal idea of modern nationalism, in both benign and malignant forms" (322). What Taylor does not point out, however, is that even at the individual level, an originality-based concept of dignity can be malignant; infringements on an individual's authentic *way* of being human can be met with the same obstinacy as insults to one's social honor were avenged through dueling in the old days. Even in its conception as a matter of personal identity, dignity is a matter of *position*. Even if it is not a social position like honor, dignity is in the least a moral position—a self-assured and defensive position. Respect for human dignity can spell ethnocentricity at the *Volk* level and egocentricity at the individual level. This egocentricity, it should be noted, is not the same as the sensuous self-interest that Kant wants purged from "pure reason." As self-assertion, egocentricity is a political position within the realm of *bios*, not a matter of instinct that belongs in *zoē*.

Coetzee: Racism and the Stigmatization of *Zoē*

Coetzee argues that social violence results from stigmatizing natural desire and sensuous self-interest as undignified, from suppressing the

zoē in favor of *bios* (life in a political community, the *Volk*). The logic of institutionalized racism, as represented in apartheid, is political and not biological; it works by delegitimizing personal material interest, desires, and instincts. Coetzee shows that racist discourse, particularly in the modern period, depends less on biological arguments and more on notions of a community and the responsibility to such a community. In *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1996), he probes the mind of Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-1992), pro-apartheid writer and academic, who "shifts his ground" for *Afrikanervolk* uniqueness, "from biologism to the idea of the organic *Volk*, as elaborated by Herder. For in Herderian theory the individual is born into the *Volk* and has no natural rights apart from it. The *volkswil* to which each individual member must bow is thus more than a political consensus" (173-5). As we can see here, hegemonic discourse does not allow subjects "natural" life outside the community.

Coetzee's attempts to demonstrate that racism is an act of suppressing natural desire in the name of dignity and self-respect also counter the commonly held belief that hegemony creates a self-contained animal fulfilling petty needs. For instance, Coetzee argues that Cronjé, while naturally supporting the 1939 recommendation by the Commission on Mixed Marriages for banning interracial marriages, does not confront the question of why a law is necessary, in other words, "why a person should fly in the face of public opinion to make a mixed marriage"; neither the Commission nor Cronjé "confronts, that is, the question of desire" (171).

> What Cronjé does not address in his text, what he turns away from, is the desire for mixture. Yet to mixture his mind obsessively returns … It is mixture and the desire for mixture that is the secret enemy of Geoffrey Cronjé and his fellow-knights of apartheid, the baffling force that must be thwarted, imprisoned, shut away. Apartheid is a dream of purity, but an impure dream. It is many things, a mixture of things; one of the things it is, is a set of barriers that will make it impossible for the desire to mix to find fulfillment. (165)

Cronjé casts his evasion of the question of desire in the discourse of "self-respect" and "racial pride," terms that conjure Nietzsche's description of the "last man" who satisfies petty wants and desires and loses the *thymos*. Coetzee quotes Cronjé: "There are whites, born in this country, who have degenerated to such an extent in respect of morality, self-respect and racial pride that they feel no objection against blood-mixing." For the "blood purity of the people" to be protected, Cronjé wants "women confining themselves to men of pure blood" (168). However, "feminine chastity is in itself no guarantee of continuing blood-purity, and the *Afrikanermoeder* will be the protector of the race only as long as she, too, is protected" (169). Coetzee reformulates and analyzes one of the perennial questions for Cronjé: "Is it natural or unnatural to desire to mix blood with the blood of another race? … If the former, then we may expect desire continually to cross race-boundaries, and the struggle to contain it within race boundaries will be never-ending. If, on the other hand, desire operates naturally only within the race, then desire across racial lines is as unnatural as bestiality." Cronjé prefers to think that "aversion to sexual contact with other races" is "determined genetically (i.e., racially)" and not "culturally (i.e., by custom)." But Cronjé cannot cover up the big "mixed-blood population in South Africa" and, therefore, he has to account for its history: "For a generation or two in the seventeenth century, he concedes, there may have been no prejudice against blood-mixing. However, as the eyes of the colonists became opened to the extent of differences between the races, an aversion grew … to be 'an instinct.' But it was not a true instinct" (169).

Moreover, Coetzee seems to argue that pursuing "real" self-interest (i.e. personal interest as opposed to group interest) is a way of breaking through racialist discourse, even though such an argument might sound politically incorrect (political correctness, as we will see later, is never one of his concerns). Under the guise of "rationalism" (the long-term interest of the group), an "insane" apartheid system legitimized racism by delegitimizing self-interest (immediate personal interest, which Coetzee sees as the only sane form of self-interest):

> If there is an orthodoxy among historians of apartheid today,