Preface: The Motion of Inquiry

I began the work that led to this book amid breakdowns connected to the notion of human dignity and to the politics of intrinsic worth that have accompanied that term since the mid-twentieth century.

Despite what some have suggested, these breakdowns have not been primarily discursive\(^1\)—though ever since the global expansion of human rights discourses in the 1970s, one prominent response has been a multiplication of talk about human dignity and its discontents.\(^2\) These breakdowns, rather, have been taking place at other critical junctures. Most importantly, they have been taking place at those junctures where the question of how to talk about human dignity has become bound up in the problem of how to turn it into a practice.

SPIRITUAL POLITICS

In the postwar era, human dignity began to be fashioned as the anchor point for what might be called a “spiritual politics”: *spiritual* in that the politics of human dignity have been indexed to something “essential” about human life that needs to be made the norm of material existence, *political* in that human dignity has become the animating concern of sustained efforts to rethink dominant modes and forms of power.

Despite being elaborated across diverse venues, the spiritual politics of human dignity have been fashioned in a remarkably consistent manner. In the first place, human dignity has been fashioned as *intrinsic*. It has been talked about, acted on, and instituted as though “grounded” in nothing other than itself. It is for this reason, for example, that the authors of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights
simply declaimed dignity and never directly explained what they meant by the term. Dignity, rendered in a declamatory style, can be thought of as *self-justifying*.

In the second place, dignity has been put forward as a *matrix of human worth* par excellence. Human dignity (to put it in negative terms) has not been cast as one aspect of human worth alongside others—and certainly not as an aspect of human worth derived from other features of human life, such as the capacity for reason or self-governance. It has been fashioned, rather, as original and defining. Human dignity has been styled as *primordial*.

In the third place, while fashioned as intrinsic and primordial, human dignity has also been cast as *vulnerable*, threatened by distinctively modern forms of power. Concerned actors have insisted that under the shadow of modernity something unequivocally valuable and vulnerable is at stake. Dignity, thus styled, must urgently be *defended*.

That today all three of these characteristics are treated as self-evident by proponents of “dignitarian politics”—and dismissed as self-evidently problematic by critics—is testament to the ubiquity of dignity’s postwar elaboration. In what follows I will unpack how this self-evidence was achieved. The point I want to draw out here is simply that whatever one makes of this figure of human dignity—as self-justifying, primordial, and vulnerable—it stabilized and became dominant in the postwar era. In recent decades, however, it has been destabilized, and its dominance has been put to the test.

**BIOPOLITICAL TESTS**

Over the past three decades, the figure of human dignity has been mobilized as a guiding norm for governing the biopolitical body. By *biopolitical* I mean those dimensions of human vitality that since the nineteenth century have been made the target of sustained political energies—from how grain is grown and circulated to the economy, of birthrates, morbidity, and mortality, to city planning and the spread of infectious disease. It is within the space of these mobilizations—within these efforts to govern the politics of human vitality in the name of human dignity—that the ethics and politics of intrinsic worth have begun to break down. They have begun to break down in the sense that previous ways of acting, relating, and thinking can no longer be taken for granted.

There are, no doubt, countless local and circumstantial reasons for this breakdown. But at the heart of things lies a tension of conceptual and operational logics. To put simply here what I will detail further on: the logic of biopolitics and the logic of human dignity are sharply contrastive. The first is relative and ameliorative, the second intrinsic and invariable.
The biopolitical operates through mechanisms of normalization. It seeks to determine what is biologically “normal” for a given population in order to inflect those norms—the World Health Organization’s “Millennial Development Goals” is a prominent example. In the postwar period, the politics of human dignity were made to operate on an orthogonal logic to such normalization. One might say that since World War II, the term human dignity has been used precisely to name that feature of human life that cannot and should not be normalized. In this light, it is not surprising that the answer to the question of how to govern human vitality in the name of intrinsic worth remains elusive.

But there is a twist. Despite apparent tensions, over the past few decades a heterogeneous range of actors, concerned in one way or another with the health and well-being of various populations, have pressed forward with the work of giving form to an ethics of intrinsic dignity enacted through the strategies of biopolitical reason. The intriguing feature of these efforts is not actually the seeming incommensurability of logics. The intriguing feature, rather, is that this seeming incommensurability has proven highly generative. For better or worse, the troubled efforts to govern human bodily life in the name of human dignity have issued in a vast expansion of ethical, political, and biological practice.

This successful expansion has itself proven problematic. While generating new practices, the interplay of human dignity and biopolitics has produced indeterminate effects, with the attendant states of uncertainty that such effects bring in their wake. No determinative resolution is in sight. This indeterminacy and uncertainty can be seen, for example, in the now decades-long effort to discern universal ethical significance in “the human” of human genomics even while major players continue to leverage genomics for addressing the health needs of specific populations. They can be seen in attempts, in multiple countries, to shift grounds for asylum from political to biomedical vulnerability. They can be seen in the failed attempts in international law to discern the biological meaning of genos in cases of genocide, in attempts in global health to quantify care for human dignity by counting calories, in disjunctive efforts to combine state-assured healthcare with practices of biomedical abandonment, and in the ad hoc efforts of some medical practitioners to inter-articulate an ethic of self-determination with an ethic of intrinsic worth in cases of physician-assisted suicide.

The list could go on. In all cases, the question of what human dignity means as a guide to biopolitical action remains far from clear. Still, attempts to meet its demands continue apace.
ONE SITE OF BREAKDOWN

For my part, I first encountered the discord of human dignity in a zone of biotechnology. In the early years of the 2000s, I was working as a research assistant to the Ethics Advisory Board (EAB) of a Bay Area biotech company called Geron. At the time, Geron held a monopoly on the intellectual property needed for commercializing human embryonic stem cells, including the technologies for embryo cloning.

Geron exemplified Silicon Valley’s culture of salvational promise. The company had been founded on a research platform dedicated to “radical” life-extending cellular technologies. Its founders had been proponents of the proposition that age-related death is linked to a failure of individual cells in the body to rejuvenate themselves. Geron’s founders convinced investors that if Geron could learn how to control the mechanisms of cell regeneration, the company might be able to extend biological life, perhaps even (in their more utopian declarations) indefinitely.

In 1997, a research team from the University of Wisconsin, led by the biologist James Thomson, announced that they had successfully generated human embryonic stem cells. Thomson’s work was funded by Geron. Three days later, the U.S. Senate held hearings to parse the ethical and economic significance of the work. Richard Doerflinger, a political journeyman from the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, was asked to testify. He rehearsed a now-familiar Roman Catholic position: “there is no distinction between defending human life and promoting the dignity of the human . . . every human life is sacred from conception to natural death.” The extraction of human embryonic stem cells destroys the developing embryo. Because of this, Doerflinger concluded, the research violates human dignity.

The research catalyzed the Vatican’s politics of intrinsic worth and indexed those politics to the task of protecting the integrity of the biological body. In so doing, it brought to sharp articulation an ontologically fraught question that politically could no longer be avoided. The question was this: is it possible to identify a specific point along an embryo’s developmental pathway when human life—which is biologically context dependent and relational—can be said to become the bearer of an intrinsic and unchanging dignity? The question generated the notorious impasses of stem cell politics.

For a time, the Geron EAB remained blocked by this intractable question. All its members, including its Catholic members, initially supported Geron’s research—albeit for different reasons and with varying degrees of reservation. The question, then, was how to move forward given the theological-political dilemmas put in play by Doerflinger’s testimony. In the end, the EAB formulated a joint position in support of research, supplemented by minority statements. The joint position reso-
nated with a 1984 report on research with human embryos in the United Kingdom known as the Warnock Report. The Warnock Report argued that a minimal mark of personhood, even potential personhood, is strict individuation—a legal criterion that would seem to have a biological correlate.

With the publication of their position paper, the EAB tried to set aside the question of intrinsic dignity and focus on Geron’s ongoing research. But if they believed they had earned the right to move on, almost no one else did. The logic of the Warnock Report satisfied virtually no one—least of all those with views consistent with the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops. The EAB remained caught in a tortured game of definition and counterdefinition, a game whose stakes turned as much on securing the capacity to govern the ethical imaginary of biotechnology as it did in clarifying the interrelations of dignity, science, and the body.

I remained in an adjacent position to these micropolitics. I was close enough to the center of things to observe the binds that were entangling first-order players. But I was not far enough outside to avoid being caught in those binds myself. Amid these tangles, I took up what seemed to be an urgent task: namely, the work of articulating an outside to the dominant subject positions on offer—an ontological as well as ethical outside that might be more concordant with the contingencies of biological and historical life and with a religious ethos worthy of the name. Working alongside bioethical and theological colleagues, I tried to frame human dignity in what could be glossed as eschatological terms: a view of dignity adhering in the making of a just future rather than in an a priori philosophy of nature.11

To put it plainly: I found the dominant renderings of human dignity to be intellectually unsatisfactory, pragmatically unhelpful, and, in a normative sense, untrue. Add to this that I found the possibility of establishing a counterposition to the prevailing politics to be seductive and the combative game of trying to displace those politics to be a pleasure. But operating within this space of refusal, seduction, and combat I was insufficiently attentive to the ways in which my efforts to formulate a normative outside to the politics of intrinsic worth actually reproduced the dynamics of a situation I otherwise knew to be blocked.

I had not yet begun to take seriously enough that human dignity, understood as self-justifying, primordial, and vulnerable, had become a constitutive and institutionally secure feature of late modern politics. That means I had also not yet grasped that a primary ethical task consisted not so much in redefining human dignity but in trying to get clearer about the manner in which this figure of intrinsic worth has been brought into being, made to operate, and set into motion in the world.

Said differently: in my efforts to elaborate an outside to the politics of intrinsic worth, I had not yet internalized Nietzsche’s insight that “unspeakably more depends on what things are called than on what they are” and that “only a fool would
think it was enough to point to this misty mantle of illusion in order to destroy the world that counts as essential.”

CONCEPTUAL AND ETHICAL EQUIPMENT

I began the labor of extracting myself from Nietzschean foolishness by stepping back from bioethics and concentrating on the broader landscape of political theology within which debates over stem cell research were playing out. Given how the debates had unfolded, this decision seemed self-evident. I remained vocationally and intellectually uneasy, however. It’s not that I found the texts and problems of political theology deficient. It’s that I did not know how to put them to work in the world as a means of contextualizing the critical limitations of religious bioethics and its uses of human dignity.

The terms of my uneasiness were partially clarified by way of an encounter with Michel Foucault’s now infamous notions of biopower and biopolitics. Given my prior entanglements, these notions initially seemed apt. They had, after all, become terms of art in contemporary theory, taken to be definitive of the excesses of the modern age. I became convinced, however, that whatever Foucault had meant by these terms, he did not intend anything as epochal or nefarious as leading theorists were proposing. He had introduced the terms as part of his effort to distinguish one distinctive economy of modern power among others. For me this meant that the terms did not so much provide answers as indications. They indicated the need to specify the economies of life and power proper to the politics of intrinsic worth.

I began to look beyond political theology and bioethics for conceptual and ethical equipment. I eventually found that equipment in anthropology. Through a series of fortuitous opportunities, my turn to anthropology eventually led to a multiyear collaboration with two anthropologists, Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis. Within this space of collaborative inquiry, I began to reformulate my project. I began to shift my attention away from the question of philosophical and theological definitions per se and toward an examination of the specific venues within which human dignity has been redefined and mobilized.

This reformulation opened up a different relation to the politics of intrinsic worth: I undertook the work problematizing human dignity as an artifact of the recent past and of facing the existential difficulties of rethinking my relation to that past. I recast my project as a kind of “discourse of modernity on modernity,” positioning dignity less as the kind of thing one might be for or against and more as an event in the recent history of relations between the body and human worth, one in need of further investigation.
POLITICAL SPIRITUALITY

My reformulation was oriented, in part, by my rereading of Foucault’s 1981–1982 lectures at the Collège de France. The lectures deal centrally with the problem of how to think about shifting relations of knowledge, capacity, and care—relations that have been vital to the history of human dignity as well as to my own efforts to engage that history.

In the lectures, Foucault proposes a conceptual distinction between philosophy and spirituality and their relation to Antique notions of care—care for oneself and care for others. Foucault asserts what other historians have argued: that for the Antique philosophical schools and the early Christian monastics, philosophy was distinguishable but ultimately inseparable from spirituality. “Philosophy” was understood to be a form of life that asks “how can truth and falsehood be distinguished?” “Spirituality” concerned the question of what needed to be done in order to gain access to the truth. To quote Foucault, spirituality concerns “the set of these researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth.”

Hence care. In order to gain access to the truth one had to learn how to care for oneself—how to attend to oneself and how to direct one’s attention—as well as how to care for others—how to constitute ethical communities with others such that a life dedicated to truth might become mutually salvational.

For the primary actors considered in this book, the question of how to care for human dignity—of how to speak and act in the name of human dignity—required tending to this same set of distinctions. It required determining the conditions under which one can have access to the truth about human worth and vulnerability as well as weighing the costs one might have to pay in gaining access to those truths, costs measured in institutional transformations, political renunciations, and religious modifications.

The theme of spirituality and care actually appeared in Foucault’s work two years earlier, during a decisive transition from a sustained investigation of modernity, turning on biopower, to truth, politics, and subjectivity, turning on ethics. In a 1978 roundtable with historians, Foucault explained that he had been haunted “from the first” by the problem of how certain modes and forms of truth speaking—“regimes of veridiction”—and modes and forms of governance—“regimes of jurisdiction”—had come to define the history of the West. Among other difficulties, this conjunction of veridiction and jurisdiction puts in question the practice of history itself,
given that the historian’s tools—the historian’s own modes of truth speaking and forms of governance—are implicated in the very histories under investigation.  

Foucault proposed that this historical problem and this problem of history constituted a “decisive arrangement”: the challenge of discovering new ways of distinguishing true and false is linked to the challenge of discovering new ways of governing oneself and others. This decisive arrangement, he suggested, can be thought of as the political problem in its most general form, a form that brings the object and subject of thought into the same frame. He concluded by asking: “[what should we call] the search for a new formulation of each of these practices, in itself and in relation to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false?” His answer: “political spirituality.”

PRACTICING POLITICAL SPIRITUALITY

The concept of political spirituality is not an answer to the problem of human dignity. It is an indication of possible analytic variables, which can be used to specify elements that have shaped human dignity as well as one’s relation to those elements. The use of these analytic variables set my project into motion. Equally important, it helped me begin to exit the first-order binds characteristic of the debates over stem cell research.

Meditating on the games of truth and power entailed in those debates was clarifying. I was better able to see that my work might actually be more fruitful—for myself and others—as an inquiry into how the politics of intrinsic worth were made and how the terms of this fabrication ultimately produced critical limitations. Such an inquiry seemed more salient than yet another contribution to the normative redefinition of the dignified human.

Equally important, I was able to actively accept and pursue what had become the de facto ethical status of my work. My work had become marked by what might be thought of as a Deweyan sensibility. The American pragmatist John Dewey argued that the task of thinking begins in an indeterminate or discordant situation and strives to work through the elements of that situation in order to move toward greater determination and greater concord.  

If one is successful, one might find a way of turning breakdown into an opportunity for insight and response.

For Dewey, the work of ethics—the ethics of thinking—does not require an explicit further step beyond the intellectual labor of scientific inquiry, that is, beyond the critical investigations entailed in the work of moving from lesser to greater determination in a troubled situation. That intellectual labor, after all, already requires the thinker to discern and formulate those aspects of the situation that count
as significant and, in so doing, open up the possibility of a different relation—a reconstructed relation—to the present and the near future.

The motion of inquiry became clear to me: the movement of thought from a situation of breakdown to a range of possible solutions not only constituted something to be studied “out there” in the world. It also constituted a practice for the thinker embedded in the troubled situation. In other words, it became clear to me that the work of thought on human dignity required conceptualizing the history of how human dignity had been figured—and that this might already constitute an ethical contribution.

In this light, it bears stating that my work on human dignity and my attempt to bring to articulation a more satisfying account of this figure of *anthropos* did not constitute an exit from bioethics or political theology. Rather, it constituted an attempt to secede from the dominant modes of practice in those domains as well as the norms and forms of subjectivity mandated as part of those modes. Secession, in this sense, consists of committed adjacency whereby insight is generated by motion into and out of a particular situation.

I am not sure what others would call this motion of critical adjacency, but anthropology seems apposite. Or perhaps, as one of the reviewers of this book put it, the position of adjacency articulated in this book can be thought of as an experiment in “theologizing the theologians.” Either way, what follows is a theologically inflected anthropology of the ways in which the figure of human dignity has been imagined and made into a practice over the past half-century, an examination conducted with dedicated attention to the interconnections of truth, power, and care entailed in the question of political spirituality.

Over the course of this examination, I have actually moved closer to the stakes of the domains under investigation than I was when directly engaged in the first-order games of defining human dignity and the biological body. Putting the games of definition, counterdefinition, denunciation, and counterdenunciation into anthropological and theological perspective has opened up the possibility of rethinking the historical contours of a problem as well as my own unsettled relation to it.

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