Technicians of Human Dignity
Gaymon Bennett

Published by Fordham University Press

Bennett, Gaymon.
Technicians of Human Dignity: Bodies, Souls, and the Making of Intrinsic Worth.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/42424

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1655757
I have been guided in this book by the proposition that the turn to human dignity in the last half-century marks out a shift, or a series of shifts, in relations among conceptions of human worth, modes of exercising power, and the elaboration of ethical equipment. Equally important has been the conjoined proposition that this series of shifts was put into motion by breakdowns in prior ways of imagining and acting on these relations. In each of the three cases I have tried to provide a sketch, however minimal, of the situations wherein these breakdowns and shifts occurred. To be more precise, I have provided a sketch of situations wherein concerned actors in key venues began to bring about a shift in these relations by problematizing various domains (the secular, the sovereign, and the scientific) in terms of a breakdown in care for human dignity.
HUMAN DIGNITY AS AN EVENT

By giving focused attention to shifts in the conception of relations among truth speaking, power, and ethics I have attempted to grasp the theme of human dignity as the marker of an event. I have tried to grasp human dignity as a marker of an event insofar as the efforts to problematize this figure drew together, gave name to, and helped produce an ensemble of complex historical and imaginative processes: a heterogeneous object of study whose elements and rationality, though diverse and even diffuse, can nonetheless be located in specific venues and specific situations. I have taken it to follow that any sufficient analysis of human dignity will need to include the study of specific institutions, the modes and forms of knowledge used by the actors in those institutions, the efforts of those actors to rationalize their work and their institutions in view of those modes and forms, and the attempts to articulate a politics of care that might facilitate intervention. Among all of these variables I have chosen to focus on one aspect that I think has been more or less overlooked, or at least overlooked as a constitutive part of this historically specific event: the reflective practices undertaken by concerned actors to give articulation to what human dignity means, signifies, and requires. These reflective practices constitute one crucial matrix through which the figure of human dignity and the politics of intrinsic worth have been actualized. To put a sharper point on it (and to introduce a term that is a bit awkward insofar as it is unfamiliar, if accurate), I have focused on the practices of figuration at play in the event of human dignity. Insofar as human dignity names and marks out an event, it is an event wherein concerned actors were (and still are) actively trying to constitute human dignity as the axiological element in what one might cautiously refer to as a “global moral imaginary,” as well as the rationalizing element of this imaginary. Human dignity has been made to constitute (simultaneously) the outside, the limit, and the principle of order for the activities and rationale of enculturated secularization, of state sovereignty, and of the biological sciences. However “global” the formulations of these concerned actors, it is crucial to remain true what has become a basic rule of thumb in the interpretive human sciences: never to lose sight of the fact that these problematizations of human worth and power, formulated as universals, were actually given form by way of a number of specific episodes that can be identified and characterized, even if they cannot really be summed up. On one level, this may all seem obvious and thus go without saying. But given the long history of human dignity as a term of philosophical art in which the universal has been put into play at the expense of the particular, it strikes me as worth underlining.

Implicit in all of this is that I have treated the practices of figuration connected to human dignity as though these practices were more or less discontinuous with
the histories of reasoning about human dignity that preceded the efforts undertaken in the three venues I have examined. I chose to proceed in this fashion for both strategic and stylistic reasons. It is the case that existing work on human dignity has often presumed too much continuity in the history of the definition and use of the term—the long and complex history of dignity as part of broader efforts to articulate humanisms of both the left and the right. For this reason, it seemed to me that it was worth lifting out and emphasizing discontinuity, even at the risk of underemphasizing those points at which the concerned actors involved did not, in fact, break from older traditions. The actors in each of these venues, in different ways and to varying degrees, were, of course, well aware of the traditions of thought and practice within which and in view of which they were problematizing human dignity. Indeed, there was a sense among almost all of the participants that they were bringing human dignity to articulation not only as part of a tradition but that in talking about dignity they were merely pointing to a permanent and defining feature of human reality.

Put differently, human dignity can be thought of as a contemporary event, taking the term in the technical sense I have discussed. To say that human dignity is contemporary is to say that it is an ensemble made up of characteristics, relationships, and elements both old and new. Perforce, human dignity, even when studied as an event marked by institutional change, unexpected breaks in political form, and the invention of new modes of reasoning, exists in a dependent relation to the history of previous efforts to think about human worth and the exercise of power. The challenge I have tried to take up is to make sense of these relations between the old and the new in such a way as to be able to determine better the logic and significance of the resulting configuration. As one means to a similar end, Rabinow, taking a cue from Michel Foucault (who himself follows Immanuel Kant’s lead on this point), has proposed a conceptual strategy for distinguishing among modes of historical being in order to facilitate the work of discerning how elements within a given situation get assembled and how their significance gets constituted. He has proposed that we understand “the modern” as an ethos term, designating a reflective mode of relating to the present rather than as a term that marks out a specific epoch. In this way, we can think of the modern as a moving ratio of the new and the old, in which the metric of significance is the extent to which the new breaks from and supersedes the old. In a parallel fashion, one can say that “the traditional” can also be thought of as an ethos rather than a prior period of time. In this way, one can think of tradition as a moving ratio of the old and the new in which the metric of significance is the normativity of the old triumphing over the new. In distinction to both of these, Rabinow insists that today there is a need to undertake inquiries into “the contemporary” understood as an ethos in which ensembles of new and old elements are
stylized in such a way that significance adheres neither in the triumph of the new over the old nor in the pull of tradition slowing down the impulsive thrust of the new. The contemporary, rather, is a stylization of the new and the old in which the resulting assemblage and its significance is determined by how it constitutes, and allows one to contend with, heterogeneous and unsettled problems.

Human dignity, it seems to me, is just such a contemporary assemblage: an assemblage of discourses, practices, and relationships that can be characterized as “a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already become historical.” Understood in this sense, any sufficient study of human dignity will need to include the genealogical work of showing how such an event is not only discontinuous with, but also a response to and an extension of, prior assemblages.

In terms of my own efforts, further work on the contemporary norms and forms of human dignity clearly remains to be done. In this book I have explored some of the primary conditions and rationales, definitions and logics, within which human dignity, over the past half-century, has been brought to articulation as a response to previous breakdowns. I have not yet undertaken the work of jumping to the other side of those breakdowns so as to discover where, precisely, the old elements in contemporary assemblages came from. Nor have I run these formative events forward in order to determine how elements ramifying out of each of the three cases are being re-formed as part of other contemporary assemblages—though these ramifications have been very much on my mind. My focus in this book on discontinuity in the recent history of human dignity has nonetheless been warranted. Several aspects of the politics of intrinsic worth today suggest that human dignity may in fact be as much a “modern” feature of reality as a contemporary one, in that its “new” conceptual and institutional features have been primed. These features were advanced vigorously by the primary actors involved—even if they were advanced in a manner that seemed to take for granted continuity with the older forms of reasoning. Perhaps more importantly, over the previous few decades, human dignity has continued to be asserted as a rationale for political and humanitarian action into new domains and situations in such a way that its archonic character puts in question existing power relations and in such a way that the archonic and the practices of care connected to it need to be reworked and reinvented. Indeed, actors in domains from bioethics to global health continue to invent practices through which the “archonic settlement” can be remobilized. These strategic mobilizations, however, are putting the limits of that previous settlement to the test. I explored one example of this putting-to-the-test in my third case study: the use of human dignity as a term for governing contemporary biology. Other similar examples of breakdown that might have been taken up in this book include such events as the
militarization of humanitarian interventions that has taken place over the last few decades, the articulation of so-called preemptive war in the logic of action against “terrorists,” and the shifts in the international governance of climate change, which simultaneously invoke the intrinsic politics of human dignity, the normalizing politics of biopower, and the sovereign politics of national self-determination. In a fashion parallel to writings in bioethics, these uses of human dignity have excited a number of discursive exchanges in which, yet again, the definition of human dignity and its self-evidence have been taken up: a fight over the definition of human dignity as a means of deciding to take military action (or not), or curtailing the excesses of global industry (or not). Developments in global public health and second-generation human rights work need to be rethought in this light as well. A challenge in each of these cases is to determine where the extension of the “archonic settlement” might be leading: where it might prove to be generative of new ethical figures of human and nonhuman life, where it might occasion the invention of new discursive and political practices, and where it might, in the end, fail to sustain the politics of intrinsic worth. In either case—reconfiguration or breakdown—it seems clear that human dignity continues to be an event whose shifting features warrant sustained attention.

THE RECENT PAST AND THE NEAR FUTURE

In each of the cases which I have examined, human dignity marks a moment of significant institutional constitution or reconstitution. In these cases, even where human dignity is presumed to be a continuous or permanent feature of reality, and even where actors appeal to older legacies of thought, such as with the Vatican, there is something new put in play that must be accounted for. I have tried to make the case that in undertaking the work of establishing themselves as capable—even uniquely capable—of caring for human dignity, the actors in each of these venues defined human dignity and defined their own capacities and obligations in a fashion that was historically distinctive. Nonetheless, and despite my effort to treat human dignity as an event, I take seriously a basic insight of inquiry into the contemporary: in contemporary assemblages such as those formed by human dignity the old plays as significant a role as the new. Given this, questions of historical continuity and therein historical causality remain open to further exploration. To that end it would be worth addressing the contemporary forms of human dignity in a fashion keyed to those places where the activities of the central actors involved depended on, and conformed to, prior histories of discourse and practice. It is worth considering, for example, the extent to which human dignity, as brought to articulation within these institutional settings in the twentieth century, connects
to and diverges from conceptions of the dignity of persons in nineteenth-century philosophical, judicial, and social theory. In the case of the Second Vatican Council, the notion of dignified persons is frequently used interchangeably with the dignity of humans, or with the dignity of human persons. Few if any of the participating theologians, however, conceived of dignity as grounded in those features of personhood famously called out in Kant’s work, features such as rationality or autonomy. They did, however, connect their notions of human dignity to the rise of Catholic social thought of the late nineteenth century. In a similar fashion, members of the Commission on Human Rights as well as the President’s Council on Bioethics explicitly distanced themselves from an ethics of the rational person in their efforts to get clearer about how dignity is absolute and does not derive from any specific feature of human life. Nonetheless, despite such self-conscious distancing on the part of some of the participants involved, the relation between twentieth-century figures of human dignity and the complicated legacy of nineteenth-century thinking about the dignity of persons needs to be examined more carefully.⁶

Similarly, it would be fruitful to think through the relation of the contemporary figure of archonic human dignity to notions of the “dignity of man” as conceived in the romantic philosophy of the early nineteenth century and the Marxist and other socialist philosophies of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Socialist assessments of dignity, and the conditions under which such dignity can be brought to historical actualization, played an influential role both in the formulations of the Commission on Human Rights and the politics of the Second Vatican Council. In the former case, disagreements over the extent to which direct remediation of economic conditions is necessary for the cultivation of dignity were a primary blockage point in relation to which the procedural decision not to “define” human dignity was ultimately taken. In the latter case, members of the clergy representing strongly socialist parts of the world differed considerably in their assessment of the relative worth of modernity. Insofar as the authors of Gaudium et spes set out to interpret the “signs of the time,” their reading of modernity set the terms according to which, from Vatican II forward, theologians were able both to connect their thinking to a socialist political agenda and to reject the political excesses of state-centered communist thought. The legacy of South American liberation theologies, and their use of notions of human dignity, the connection of those uses to early Catholic social thought, as well as the Vatican’s strong theologico-legal response to the Cold War suppression of the Catholic Church, are examples of where a deeper history of thinking about the dignity of man might illuminate contemporary notions of human dignity.

Similar to these two—the dignity of persons and the dignity of man—I believe it would be valuable to rethink the relation of contemporary figures of human dig-
nity to those understandings of dignity first brought to articulation in late medieval humanist philosophy. Pico della Mirandola’s *De hominis dignitate* has been cited as the first time the notion of human dignity, per se, is brought to articulation. Pico’s rendering of the human as a figure standing between “gods and beasts” has been taken up by at least one contemporary thinker closely involved in the work of the PCBE. The differences between the kind of actions and communities that are taken to follow from classical notions of human dignity and those put forward in recent years are striking. In Pico, the human is capable of relative ascension and decline, and dignity remains a kind of nascent possibility that only comes to actualization through regimes of striving and cultivation. It is, in this sense, articulated both as a kind of universal and permanent truth about the human reality, but one infrequently actualized. Understood in this way, Pico’s vision for human dignity might be compared both to the formulations from *Gaudium et spes* and *Beyond Therapy*. The difference—and it is not an incidental difference—is that dignity in Pico’s rendering is not an actuality that is present and thereby susceptible to violation. It is, rather, a possibility that must be achieved; the *dignity* in human dignity is an achievement and not a given.

In light of this last point, it seems to me that it would be especially worthwhile to think through how the contemporary figure of human dignity fits within a wider horizon of the history of humanism. The worth of such an undertaking goes up, in my estimation, to the extent that such history can be examined as a series of critical interventions, that is, an examination of the ways in which humanisms of both the left and the right have been used to enact ethical and political intervention. In Foucault’s inestimable essay “What Is Enlightenment?” he suggests that a history of humanism presents a particularly difficult undertaking insofar as the humanistic thematic is too supple and diffuse to serve as a stable axis for reflection. The key term is thematic. Humanism, on Foucault’s account, is a theme in the history of thought. This theme, he suggests, can be contrasted to an event, such as, in the case of his essay, the Enlightenment. The salient difference, he asserts, is that as an event the Enlightenment is characterized by a “principle of a critique and permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy.” The theme of humanism, or the set of themes that can be designated as humanism, although critical—for example, humanism as a critique of religion, humanism as a critique of science, of politics, and so on—always ends up falling back on conceptions of “man” borrowed from religion, science, or politics. Its difference is that it recasts these conceptions in a valuative fashion. So, on the one side, Enlightenment can be thought of as a permanent critique and a practice of self-creation, and on the other, appeals to the nature of man constitute a means by which humanity might be conceived and defined in a range of ways, but it is always given and valorized.
From the standpoint of those elaborating human dignity, one can acknowledge the incisiveness of Foucault’s assessment. But it seems to me that from the standpoint of the history of thought and its critical relationship to power, Foucault’s assessment leaves something out. What it leaves out is the fact that in the case of contemporary conceptions of human dignity, whatever the intentions of the primary actors involved, the effect of their actions was precisely to put in question the existing set of relations between truth and power. In this respect, these technicians of human dignity did, in fact, produce a set of artifacts and historical effects that can plausibly be cast as a practice of critique wherein a new figure of the human was invented. This figure was certainly not brought to articulation as a practice of self-invention on the part of the actors involved; they were not, to use Foucault’s language, engaged in a critical ontology of themselves so as to free themselves from their own histories. From the standpoint of those who now live in the worlds that they helped create by institutionalizing an archonic form of human dignity, however, these actors did put into play a set of possibilities that have ramified globally. One can certainly agree with Foucault that humanism should not be confused with the Enlightenment understood as a critical practice of freedom. But it might prove worthwhile, nonetheless, to think through human dignity and its contemporary effects as part of a somewhat more continuous history of humanisms—not so much to identify the contemporary figure of human dignity with other themes in that history but to see what insights might come of reading that history as a series of critical events and not only as an enduring thematic.

Such an exercise might help focus attention on the role of human dignity in the play of the autopoetic and the themitical—to return to James Faubion’s distinction. As I suggested in the introduction, it is reasonable to claim that over the past half-century the archonic figure of human dignity has become “themitical” insofar as it has become a relatively homeostatic dimension of ethical and political fields of practice and has thereby become available for recalibration, reproduction, and reuse in and across disparate domains of contemporary life. Faubion’s term, recall, is meant to mark out for anthropological investigation a dimension of the study of ethical life that has sometimes been overlooked by those who proceed in something like an Aristotelian fashion, that is, in a fashion particularly attentive to practices of self-making or autopoiesis. Faubion argues that if ethics is taken to be a practice of freedom leading to work on one’s subjectivity—practices of the care of the self—that practice is often facilitated by and enacted through relatively stable ethical traditions. Analytically speaking, practices of self-making can be examined as mediated through and dependent on traditions while also intervening in and reworking the historically contingent life of those traditions. Of course, this is just analytically speaking; in any concrete situation things are likely to escape any clean
distinction between the reproductive and the self-making. These designations, after all, are simply points of orientation and therefore an aid in studying the cacophony of human affairs. They are neither explanations nor conclusions. All of this is to say that however homeostatic the archonic logic of human dignity has become, it has also and simultaneously become a site of regular reinvention and elaboration, leading, in some cases, to breakdown. Dignity’s susceptibility to proliferation and remobilization is a vector for its reconfiguration; the task is to account for these reconfigurations and their effects.

I assert here—and I only assert—that the attempt to bring together the biological sciences and human dignity under the sign of governance has proven to be one such vector of reconfiguration and perhaps even a privileged one. One reason for this is that this conjunction of biology and dignity brings a humanitarian apparatus and dignitarian politics into an essentially biopolitical problem space. “The dignified human,” introduced as an ethical norm and solution to problems of the biological body, instead has become a problem. The figure of human dignity in these cases has become a trading zone within which discourses and practices associated with the development of the medical and biological sciences have begun to be reassembled such that the objects, discourses, and practices of biopower are being interpolated into and put in tension with the objects, discourses, and practices of dignity. Unwittingly, within this zone, other problems and practices have arisen that have proven to be beyond the metrics of either biopower or human dignity. Bioethics is a case in point. To borrow the title of a prominent article on these themes, transformations in the logic and practice of human dignity at the interface of the biological and biomedical sciences seem to be opening up multiple new forms of the “politics of life.” Or, to be more precise, they are opening multiple new politics of anthropos. Multiple scholars, after all, have indicated places where the prior logics of biopower are being reworked and hence where a new figure, bios, is becoming available to the operations of power. If one can say that human dignity is not simply a residual of the biopolitical but has, in fact, introduced an alternative, if critically adjacent, political and ethical rationality, then one might also say that the breakdown of the archonic logic of human dignity today may be serving as a site for the constitution of new figure of anthropos.

This seems to indicate that any anthropologically sufficient account of human dignity will need to situate its energies and attentions somewhere between stabilized conceptions of moral order and the apparatuses calibrated to them, and the practices of freedom that allow for the invention of ethical and political possibility. I have suggested that the biosciences represent one privileged site for such an undertaking; there are no doubt others. Perhaps it goes without saying, but such practices of freedom, insofar as they include what I have called, for lack of a better
term, “practices of figuration,” must not be confused with “mere discourse.” Representations, after all, are social facts. Human dignity is not a kind of rhetorical remainder either of a longer history of humanism, a concern for justifying human rights, or of biopolitical reason. One ought to resist the temptation to think that the only real anthropological action connected to human dignity lies in the extradiscursive activities of those institutions that justify themselves by appeal to it. The micropolitics connected to talk of human dignity ramify in significant ways. Moreover, in the case of the three venues I have examined, the discursive problem is not only conceptual. The problem, rather, is how to bring to articulation and thereby give possible institutional form to something like “programs” for reality. Such calculated attempts to reimagine moral order and its institutional dimensions are rarely identical to the actual practices that develop in connection to them. In this sense, if talk of human dignity is not identical to the real-world apparatuses that have developed in connection to that talk, one needs to take care not to disregard such talk as utopian. These programmatic renderings of dignity are, rather, something closer to “fragments of reality that induce such particular effects in the real as the distinction between true and false implicit in the way men ‘direct,’ ‘govern,’ and ‘conduct’ themselves and others.” Even for the actors most closely involved in its figuration, human dignity, as a way of “dividing up the true and the false so as to produce a different way of exercising power,” is always simultaneously treated as a given (human dignity is primordial) and that which is in need of actualization (human dignity is under duress). Both premise and obligation: hence, the analytic challenge of specifying the effects on the real being produced today by the figural and institutional play of human dignity.

CODA ON DIGNITY AND THE BODY

Within a remarkably short period of time after James Thomson’s announcement that his team had successfully derived human embryonic stem cells, the religious politics of the affair had intensified worldwide. The research excited policy debates and political blockages well beyond the Catholic Church and American vital politics, both nationally and internationally. Eventually even the United Nations sounded in. And although it is unsurprising that the affair played out differently across different cultural and juridical contexts, the frequency with which stem cell politics returned to the binds of human dignity and the body is remarkable. For those committed to fighting over the terms of human dignity—what it means and what it demands in relation to human vitality—these binds ultimately redounded to a tacit intellectual blackmail. In the end, one either had to be for or against human dignity.
The terms of that blackmail are not unique to the ethics and politics of biotechnology, and they need to be refused. They need to be refused because they are part of the blockage and breakdown that troubles the contemporary. Human dignity and its unsettled relation to questions of intrinsic worth cannot reasonably be made the object of a simple polemic. The notion of human dignity is a social fact of our recent history, and the politics of intrinsic worth have shaped the current topology of life, ethics, and power. The game of being told one must either support human dignity as an inescapably intrinsic feature of human reality or denounce it as the residue of an opportunistic politics is entirely misplaced. We would be wise to take another word of advice from Michel Foucault, who once suggested that in order to think clearly one must refuse everything presented in the form of “a simplistic and authoritarian alternative.”

In composing this book I have proceeded in a manner commensurate with that maxim. I have done this by taking up human dignity and its contemporary breakdowns as an event of our historical ontology. I have sketched this event across religious, political, and scientific domains. I have attended to the ways it has shaped these domains: the ways they have been imagined, talked about, valorized, and resisted. More or less all of the actors and institutions I studied as part of this book take human dignity utterly seriously. The proposition that human dignity must be made a norm for the critique of modern forms of truth and power remains crucial to how they conduct their ethics and politics. For a significant portion of them, the only question is where and how that norm should be given form. The question that they have left unanswered, however, is the second-order one: how, exactly, have they gone about this work of giving form to human dignity? What has their form giving done? And what is yet to do?