

Dignity and Enhancement¹

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Does human enhancement threaten our dignity as some prominent commentators have asserted? Or could our dignity perhaps be technologically enhanced? After disentangling several different concepts of dignity, this essay focuses on the idea of dignity as a quality, a kind of excellence admitting of degrees and applicable to entities both within and without the human realm. I argue that dignity in this sense interacts with enhancement in complex ways which bring to light some fundamental issues in value theory, and that the effects of any given enhancement must be evaluated in its appropriate empirical context. Yet it is possible that through enhancement we could become better able to appreciate and secure many forms of dignity that are overlooked or missing under current conditions. I also suggest that in a posthuman world, dignity as a quality could grow in importance as an organizing moral/aesthetic idea.

The Meanings of Dignity and Enhancement

The idea of dignity looms large in the post-war landscape of public ethics. Human dignity has received prominent billing in numerous national and international declarations and

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constitutions. Like some successful politicians, the idea of dignity has hit upon a winning formula by combining into one package *gravitas*, a general feel-good quality, and a profound vagueness that enables all constituencies to declare their allegiance without thereby endorsing any particular course of action.

The idea of dignity, however, also has behind it a rich historical and philosophical tradition. For many of the ancients, dignity was a kind of personal excellence that only a few possessed to any significant degree. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 to 43 BC), a Roman following in the footsteps of the Athenian Stoics, attributed dignity to all men, describing it as both a characteristic (human rationality) and a requirement (to base one's life on this capacity for rationality).² In Medieval Christianity, the dignity of man was based on the belief that God had created man in His image, allowing man to share some aspects of His divine reason and might.³ Theologians thought they saw man's dignity reflected in his upright posture, his free will, his immortal soul, and his location at the center of the universe. This dignity was viewed as an essential characteristic of the human being, possessed by each one of us, independent of social rank and personal excellence.

In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the intrinsic dignity of man was decoupled from theological assumptions about a divine heritage of the human species. According to Kant (here partly echoing the Stoics), all persons have dignity, a kind of absolute value that is incomparable to any price or instrumental utility.⁴ Kant held that dignity is not a quantitative notion; we cannot have more or less of it. The ground of the dignity of persons is their capacity for reason and moral agency. In order to respect this dignity, we must always treat another person as an end and never solely as a means. In order to avoid affronting our own dignity, we must also refrain from treating ourselves merely as a tool (such as by groveling to others, or selling ourselves into slavery) and from acting in ways that would undermine our rational agency (such as by using intoxicants, or committing suicide).⁵

² (Wetz 2000), p. 241f.

³ Ibid., 242.

⁴ This grounding of dignity in personhood and rational moral agency leaves out small children and some humans with mental retardation. This might be viewed as major problem (which Kant largely ignored).

⁵ The Stoics claimed that we *ought* to commit suicide if we know that our rational agency is at risk. Kant's dignity-based argument against suicide is more complex but less persuasive.

The term “human dignity” did not feature in any European declarations or constitutions in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Franz Josef Wetz, it is found for the first time, albeit more or less in passing, in the German constitution drawn up in 1919 by the Weimar National Assembly, and its next appearance is in the corporate-fascist Portuguese constitution of 1933. Only in the aftermath of the Second World War does the concept’s heyday begin. It appears in about four constitutions in the period of 1900-1945 and in more than 37 from 1945-1997.⁶ It is also prominent in the UN Charter of 1945, the General Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and in numerous later declarations, proclamations, and conventions.

Within applied ethics, the concept of dignity has been particularly salient in medical ethics and bioethics.⁷ It has been used to express the need for informed consent in medical research on human subjects. It has also been invoked (on both sides of the argument) in debates about end-of-life decisions and assisted euthanasia, and in discussions of organ sales and organ donations, assisted reproduction, human-animal chimaeras, pornography, torture, patenting of human genes, and human cloning. Recently, the idea of dignity has also been prominent in discussions of the ethics of human enhancement, where it has mostly been invoked by bioconservative commentators to argue against enhancement.⁸

If we examine the different uses which have been made of the idea of dignity in recent years, we can distinguish several different concepts. Before we can talk intelligibly about “dignity”, we must disambiguate the term. I propose the following taxonomy to regiment our dignity-talk:

- *Dignity as a Quality*: A kind of excellence; being worthy, noble, honorable. Persons vary in the degree to which they have this property. A form of Dignity as a Quality can also be ascribed to non-persons. In humans, Dignity as a Quality may be thought of as a virtue or an ideal, which can be cultivated, fostered,

⁶ From (Shultziner 2003), citing (Iglesias 2001).

⁷ Some think that this salience is undeserved; e.g. (Macklin 2003; Birnbacher 2005). See also (Beyleveld and Brownsword 2001; Ashcroft 2005; Caulfield and Brownsword 2006).

⁸ E.g. (Kass 2002).

respected, admired, promoted, etc. It need not, however, be identified with moral virtue or with excellence in general.⁹

- *Human Dignity (Menschenwürde)*: The ground upon which – according to some philosophers – rests the full moral status of human beings. It is often assumed that at least all normal human persons have the same level of human dignity. There is some disagreement about what precisely human dignity consists in, and this is reflected in disagreements about which individuals have human dignity: Only persons (as Kant maintained)? Or all human individuals with a developed nervous system who are not brain dead? Or fetuses in the womb too? Might some non-human primates also have this kind of dignity?¹⁰

Two other related ideas are:

- *Human Rights*: A set of inalienable rights possessed by all beings that have full moral status. One might hold that human dignity is the ground for full moral status. Human rights can be violated or respected. We might have a strict duty not to violate human rights, and an imperfect duty to promote respect for human rights.
- *(Dignity as) Social Status*: A relational property of individuals, admitting of gradation. Multiple status systems may exist in a given society. Dignity as Social Status is a widely desired prudential good. Our reasons for seeking social status are not distinctly moral, but the standards and conditions which determine the allocation of social status is a topic for ethical critique. Some social status is earned, but traditionally it was also thought that some individuals have a special

⁹ For Aristotle, excellence and virtue went together; his term for this was *kalon*, the noble. Earlier, however, in what we might call “Homeric ethics”, there was not such a close identification between virtue and honor or excellence. (I’m grateful to Guy Kahane for this point.)

¹⁰ These first two meanings are discussed in (Kolnai 1976) p. 259

intrinsic Dignity as Social Status, such as an aristocrat or a Brahmin.¹¹ Even though the Latin root word (*dignitas*) originally referred to a social status commanding respect, it might be best to refer to this property simply as Social Status to forestall confusion, reserving the word “dignity” for other uses.

All of these concepts are relevant to ethics, but in different ways.¹² In this paper, I shall focus on Dignity as a Quality and the ways in which this concept interacts with that of human enhancement.¹³

Before discussing its relations to enhancement, we shall need a richer characterization of Dignity as a Quality. I will draw on the sensitive linguistic and phenomenological analysis provided by Aurel Kolnai.¹⁴

On the idea of Dignity as a Quality of that which is dignified, Kolnai notes:

Dignity means Worth or Worthiness in some “absolute,” autonomized and objectivized, as it were “featural” sense... [Yet it] has *descriptive content*. ... It is, in this respect, on a par with any of the basic moral virtues such as justice, truthfulness, benevolence, chastity, courage, etc., including even integrity or conscientiousness, none of which is synonymous with Moral Goodness or Virtue as such, and each of which, notwithstanding its possible built-in reference to

¹¹ In respect of referring to a property partly acquired and partly inherent, the original concept of Dignity as Social Status might be thought of as intermediary between the concept of Dignity as a Quality and the concept of Human Dignity.

¹² See also (Nordenfelt 2004) for discussion of different types of dignity. Three of his dignity-concepts can be roughly mapped onto Dignity as a Quality, Human Dignity, and Dignity as Social Status. In addition, Nordenfelt also discusses a notion of *Dignity of Identity*, “the dignity we attach to ourselves as integrated and autonomous persons, persons with a history and persons with a future with all our relationships with other human beings” (p. 75). See also Adam Schulman’s introduction to this volume and (Shultziner 2003). One might also use “dignity” to refer to some combination of social status and self-esteem. For example, Jonathan Glover describes how stripping victims of their dignity (in this sense) is a common prelude to even greater atrocities; (Glover 1999).

¹³ For an earlier discussion of mine on the relation between the enhancement and Human Dignity, see (Bostrom 2005).

¹⁴ (Kolnai 1976). The Hungarian-born moral and political philosopher Kolnai (1900-1973) was, according to Karl Popper and Bernard Williams, one of the most original, provocative, and sensitive philosophers of the twentieth century. His writings have suffered some neglect and are not very widely known by philosophers working in the analytic tradition today. His explication of the concept of Dignity as a Quality is especially interesting because it seems to capture an idea that is motivating many contemporary bioconservative critiques of human enhancement.

Morality (and moral evaluation) as such, is susceptible to contentual description.¹⁵

On this understanding, Dignity as a Quality is a thick moral concept: it contains both descriptive and evaluative components, and may not be in any simple way reducible to more basic moral predicates. Dignity as a Quality also has certain aesthetic overtones. The term might have its own unique contribution to make to our normative vocabulary, but it should not be identified with Morality. If possessing Dignity as a Quality is a virtue, it is one out of many. The concept is hardly a promising candidate for the central and pivotal role in an ethical system that the idea of Human Dignity plays in Kantian philosophy and in some international declarations.¹⁶

We can proceed further by describing the appropriate responses to Dignity as a Quality. These seem to incorporate both aesthetic and moral elements. According to Kolnai, the term subtly connotes the idea of verticality, albeit tempered by also connoting a certain idea of reciprocity:

Can we attempt at all to assign, to adumbrate at least, a distinctive response to Dignity (or “the dignified”)? Whatever such a response might be, it must bear a close resemblance to our devoted and admiring appreciation of beauty (its “high” forms at any rate) on the one hand, to our reverent approval of moral goodness (and admiration, say, for heroic virtue) on the other. Dignity commands empathic respect, a reverential mode of response, an “upward-looking” type of the *pro* attitude: a “bowing” gesture if I may so call it.¹⁷

Next, let us consider what features call for such responses. What characteristics are typically dignified? While not claiming to produce an exhaustive list, Kolnai suggests the following:

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 251f.

¹⁶ The related concept of *kalon*, however, does have such a foundational role in Aristotle’s ethics.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 252.

First – the qualities of composure, calmness, restraint, reserve, and emotions or passions subdued and securely controlled without being negated or dissolved... Secondly – the qualities of distinctness, delimitation, and distance; of something that conveys the idea of being intangible, invulnerable, inaccessible to destructive or corruptive or subversive interference. ... Thirdly, in consonance therewith, Dignity also tends to connote the features of self-contained serenity, of a certain inward and toned-down but yet translucent and perceptible power of self-assertion... With its firm stance and solid immovability, the dignified quietly defies the world.¹⁸

Finally, regarding the bearers of such dignity, Kolnai remarks:

The predicates... are chiefly applicable to so-called “human beings,” i.e. persons, but, again, not exclusively so: much dignity in this sense seems to me proper to the Cat, and not a little, with however different connotation, to the Bull or the Elephant. ... Is not the austere mountainous plateau of Old Castile a dignified landscape...? And, though man-made, cannot works of art (especially of the “classic,” though not exactly “classicist,” type) have a dignity of their own?¹⁹

The term “enhancement” also needs to be explicated. I shall use the following rough characterization:

- *Enhancement*: An intervention that improves the functioning of some subsystem of an organism beyond its reference state; or that creates an entirely new functioning or subsystem that the organism previously lacked.

The function of a subsystem can be construed as either *natural* (and be identified with the evolutionary role played by this subsystem, if it is an adaptation), or *intentional* (in which case the function is determined by the contribution that the subsystem makes to

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 253f.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 254.

the attainment of relevant goals and intentions of the organism). The functioning of a subsystem is “improved” when the subsystem becomes more efficient at performing its function. The “reference state” may usually be taken to be the normal, healthy state of the subsystem, i.e. the level of functioning of the subsystem when it is not “diseased” or “broken” in any specific way. There is some indeterminacy in this definition of the reference state. It could refer to the state which is normal for some particular individual when she is not subject to any specific disease or injury. This could either be age-relative or indexed to the prime of life. Alternatively, the reference state could be defined as the “species-typical” level of functioning.

When we say “enhancement”, unless we further specify these and other indeterminacies, we do not express any very precise thought. In what follows, however, not much will hinge on exactly how one may choose to fill in this sketch of a definition of enhancement.

Greater Capacities

We can now begin our exploration of the relations between dignity and enhancement. If we recall the features that Kolnai suggests are associated with Dignity as a Quality – composure, distinctness, being inaccessible to destructive or corruptive or subversive interference, self-contained serenity, etc. – it would appear that these could be promoted by certain enhancements. Consider, for example, enhancements in executive function and self-control, concentration, or of our ability to cope with stressful situations; further, consider enhancements of mental energy that would make us more capable of independent initiative and that would reduce our reliance on external stimuli such as television; consider perhaps also enhancement of our ability to withstand mild pains and discomforts, and to more effectively self-regulate our consumption of food, exercise, and sleep. All these enhancements could heighten our Dignity as a Quality in fairly direct and obvious ways.

Other enhancements might reduce our Dignity as a Quality. For instance, a greatly increased capacity for empathy and compassion might (given the state of this world) diminish our composure and our self-contained serenity, leading to a reduction of our Dignity as a Quality. Some enhancements that boost motivation, drive, or emotional

responsiveness might likewise have the effect of destabilizing a dignified inner equilibrium. Enhancements that increase our ability rapidly to adapt to changing circumstances could make us more susceptible to “destructive or corruptive or subversive interference” and undermine our ability to stand firm and quietly defy the world.

Some enhancements, therefore, would increase our Dignity as a Quality, while others would threaten to reduce it. However, whether a particular enhancement – such as a strongly amplified sensitivity to others’ suffering – would in fact diminish our dignity depends on the context, and in particular on the character of the enhanced individual. A greatly elevated capacity for compassion is consistent with an outstanding degree of Dignity as a Quality, provided that the compassionate person has other mental attributes, such as a firm sense of purpose and robust self-esteem, that help contain the sympathetic perturbations of the mind and channel them into effective compassionate action. The life of Jesus, as described in the Bible, exemplifies this possibility.

Even if some enhancement reduced our Dignity as a Quality, it would not follow that the enhanced person would suffer a net loss of virtue. For while Dignity as a Quality might be a virtue, it is not the only virtue. Thus, some loss of Dignity as a Quality could be compensated for by a gain in other virtues. One could resist this conclusion if one believed that Dignity as a Quality is the only virtue rather than one among many. This is hardly a plausible view given the Kolnai-inspired understanding of Dignity as a Quality used in this paper.²⁰ Alternatively, one might hold that a certain threshold of Dignity as a Quality is necessary in order to be able to possess any other virtues. But even if that were so, it would not follow that any enhancement that reduced our Dignity as a Quality would result in a net loss of virtue, for the enhancement need not reduce our Dignity as a Quality below the alleged threshold.

The Act of Enhancement

Our Dignity as a Quality would in fact be greater if some of our capacities were greater than they are. Yet one might hold that *the act of enhancing* our capacities would in itself lower our Dignity as a Quality. One might also hold that *capacities obtained by means of some artificial enhancement* would fail to contribute, or would not contribute as much, to

²⁰ By contrast, e.g. to the Aristotelian concept of *Kalon*.

our Dignity as a Quality as the same capacities would have done had they been obtained by “natural” means.

For example, the ability to maintain composure under stressful conditions might contribute to our Dignity as a Quality if this capacity is the manifestation of our native temperament. The capacity might contribute even more to our Dignity as a Quality if it is the fruit of spiritual growth, as the result of long but successful psychological journey that has enabled us to transcend the trivial stressors that plague everyday existence. But if our composure is brought about by our swallowing of a Paxil, would it still reflect as favorably on our Dignity as a Quality?²¹

It would appear that our maintaining composure under stress will only fully count towards our Dignity as a Quality if we are able to view it as an authentic response, a genuine reflection of our autonomous self. In the case of the person who maintains composure only because she has taken Paxil, it might be unclear whether the composure is really a manifestation of her personality or merely of an extraneous influence. The extent to which her Paxil-persona can be regarded as her true persona would depend on a variety of factors.²² The more permanently available the anxiolytic is to her, the more consistent she is in using it in the appropriate circumstances, the more the choice of taking it is her own, and the more this choice represents her deepest wishes and is accompanied by a constellation of attitudes, beliefs, and values on which the availing herself of this drug is part of her self-image, the more we may incline to viewing the Paxil-persona as her true self, and her off-Paxil persona as an aberration.

If we compare some person who was born with a calm temperament to a one who has acquired the ability to remain calm as a result of psychological and spiritual growth, we might at first be tempted to think that the calmness is more fully a feature of the former. Perhaps the composure of a person born with a calm temperament is more stable, long-lasting, and robust than that of a person whose composure results from learning and

²¹ For this example to work properly, we should assume that the psychological states resulting are the same in each case. Suppose one thinks that there is a special dignity in *feeling* stressed out yet managing to *act* cool through an exertion of self-control and strength of character. Then the thought experiment requires that we *either* assume that the feeling of stress would be absent in all three cases (native temperament, psychological growth, Paxil), *or else* assume that (again in each of the cases) the feeling of stress would be present and the subject would succeed in acting cool thanks to her self-control (which might again have come about in either of the three ways).

²² Cf. (Kramer 1993).

experience. However, one could argue that the latter person's Dignity as a Quality is, *ceteris paribus*, the greater (i.e. even setting aside that this person would likely have acquired many other attributes contributing to his Dignity as a Quality during the course of his psychological trek). The reasoning would be that a capacity or an attribute that has become ours because of our own choices, our own thinking, and our own experiences, is in some sense more authentically ours even than a capacity or attribute given to us prenatally.

This line of reasoning also suggests that a trait acquired through the deliberate employment of some enhancement technology could be more authentically ours than a trait that we possessed from birth or that developed in us independently of our own agency. Could it be that not only the person who has acquired a trait through personal growth and experience, but also one who has acquired it by choosing to make use of some enhancement technology, may possess that trait more authentically than the person who just happens to have the trait by default? Holding other things constant – such as the permanency of the trait, and its degree of integration and harmonization with other traits possessed by the person – this would indeed seem to be the case.

This claim is consistent with the belief that coming to possess a positive trait as a result of personal growth and experience would make an *extra* contribution to our Dignity as a Quality, perhaps the dignity of effort and of the overcoming of weaknesses and obstacles. The comparison here is between traits, capacities, or potentials that we are given from birth and ones that we could develop if we are given access to enhancement technologies.²³

A precedent for the view that our self-shaping can contribute to our Dignity as a Quality can be found in Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486):

We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess

²³ The claim I make here is thus also consistent with the view put forward by Leon Kass that the "naturalness" of the means matters. Kass argues that in ordinary efforts at self-improvement we have a kind of direct experience or "understanding in human terms" of the relation between the means and their effects, one that is lacking in the case of technological enhancements (Kass 2003).

through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. ... We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer.

While *Mirandola* does not distinguish between different forms of dignity, it seems that he is suggesting both that our Human Dignity consists in our capacity for self-shaping, and also that we gain in Dignity as a Quality through the exercise of this capacity.

It is thus possible to argue that the act of voluntary, deliberate enhancement *adds* to the dignity of the resulting trait, compared to possessing the same trait by mere default.

The Enhancer's Attitude

At this point we must introduce a significant qualification. Other things equal, defiance seems more dignified than compliance and adaptation. As Kolnai notes, “pliability, unresisting adaptability and unreserved self-adjustment are prototypal opposites of Dignity”. Elaborating:

It might be argued that the feature sometimes described as the “meretricious” embodies the culmination of Un-Dignity. ... What characterizes the meretricious attitude is the intimate unity of abstract self-seeking and qualitative self-effacement. The meretricious type of person is, ideally speaking, at once boundlessly devoted to the thriving of his own life and indifferent to its contents. He wallows in his dependence on his environment – in sharp contrast to the dignity of a man’s setting bounds to the impact of its forces and undergoing their influence in a distant and filtered fashion – and places himself at the disposal of alien wants and interests without organically (which implies, selectively) espousing any of them. ... [He] escapes the tensions of alienation by precipitate

fusion and headlong surrender, and evades self-transcendence by the flitting mobility of a weightless self.²⁴

So on the one hand, the “self-made” man or woman might gain in Dignity as a Quality from being the author (or co-author) of his or her own character and situation. Yet on the other hand, it is also possible that such a person instead gains in Un-Dignity from their self-remolding. The possibility of such Un-Dignity, or loss of Dignity as a Quality, is an important concern among some critics of human enhancement. Leon Kass puts it uncompromisingly:

[The] final technical conquest of his own nature would almost certainly leave mankind utterly enfeebled. This form of mastery would be identical with utter dehumanization. Read Huxley’s *Brave New World*, read C. S. Lewis’s *Abolition of Man*, read Nietzsche’s account of the last man, and then read the newspapers. Homogenization, mediocrity, pacification, drug-induced contentment, debasement of taste, souls without loves and longings – these are the inevitable results of making the essence of human nature the last project of technical mastery. In his moment of triumph, Promethean man will become a contented cow.²⁵

The worry underlying this passage is, I think, the fear of a total loss of Dignity as a Quality, and its replacement with positive Un-Dignity.

We should distinguish two different ways in which this could result. The more obvious one is if, in selecting our enhancements, we select ones that transform us into undignified people. The point here is that these people would be undignified no matter how they came about, whether as a result of enhancement or through any other process. I have already discussed this issue, concluding that some enhancements would increase our Dignity as a Quality, other enhancements would risk reducing it, and also that whether a particular enhancement would be a benefit all-things-considered cannot usually be decided by looking only at how it would affect our dignity.

²⁴ (Kolnai 1976), pp. 265f.

²⁵ (Kass 2002), p. 48.

A more subtle source of Un-Dignity is one that emanates from the very activity of enhancement. In this latter case, the end state is not necessarily in itself undignified, but the process of refashioning ourselves which brings us there reduces our Dignity as a Quality. I argued above that a dignified trait resulting from deliberate enhancement can in favorable circumstance contribute more to our Dignity as a Quality than the same trait would if it had happened to be ours by default. Yet I think it should also be acknowledged that in *unfavorable* conditions, the act of self-transformation could be undignified and may indeed express the “meretricious” attitude described by Kolnai.

When is the activity of self-transformation dignity-increasing and when is it dignity-reducing? The Kolnai quote suggests an answer. When self-transformation is motivated by a combination of “abstract self-seeking and qualitative self-effacement”, when it is driven by alien wants and interests that have not been organically and selectively endorsed by the individual being enhanced, when it represents a surrender to mere convenience rather than the autonomous realization of a content-full personal ideal, then the act of enhancement is not dignified and may be positively undignified – in exactly the same way as other actions resulting from similar motivations may fail to express or contribute to our Dignity as a Quality.²⁶

Let us use an example. Suppose that somebody takes a cognition enhancing drug out of mere thoughtless conformity to fashion or under the influence of a slick advertising campaign. There is then nothing particularly dignified about this act of enhancement. There might even be something undignified about it inasmuch as a person who has Dignity as a Quality would be expected to exert more autonomous discretion about which substances she puts in her body, especially ones that are designed to affect her mental faculties. It might still be the case that the person after having taken the cognitive enhancer will gain in Dignity as a Quality. Perhaps the greater power and clarity of her thinking will enable her henceforth better to resist manipulative advertisements and to be more selective in her embrace of fads and fashions. Nonetheless, in itself, the enhancement act may be Undignified and may take away something from her Dignity as

²⁶ The act of enhancement could also be undignified under some other conditions. For example, one might think that if an intervention involves immoral conduct, or if it involves the use of “tainted means” (such as medical procedures developed using information obtained in cruel experiments), this would tend to make the intervention undignified. Again, however, this problem is not specific to enhancement-related acts.

a Quality. The problem is that her motivation for undergoing the enhancement is inappropriate. Her attitude and the behavior that springs from it are Un-Dignified.

Here we would be remiss if we did not point out the symmetric possibility that *refraining* from making use of an opportunity for enhancement can be Un-Dignified in exactly the same way and for the same reasons as it can be Un-Dignified to make use of one. A person who rejects a major opportunity to improve her capacities out of thoughtless conformity to fashion, prejudice, or lazy indifference to the benefits to self and others that would result, would thereby reduce her Dignity as a Quality. Rejection and acceptance of enhancement are alike in this respect: both can reflect an attitude problem.

Emotion Modification as a Special Hazard?

“Enhancements” of drives, emotions, mood, and personality might pose special threats to dignity, tempting us to escape “the tensions of alienation by precipitate fusion and headlong surrender”. An individual could opt to refashion herself to be content with reality as she finds it rather than standing firm in proud opposition. Such a choice could itself express a meretricious attitude. Worse, the transformation could result in a personality that has lost a great portion of whatever Dignity as a Quality it may have possessed before.

One can conceive of modifications of our affective responses that would level our aspirations, stymie our capacity for emotional and spiritual growth, and surrender our ability to rebel against unworthy life conditions or the shortcomings of our own characters. Such interventions would pose an acute threat to our Dignity as a Quality. The fictional drug “soma” in *Brave New World* is depicted as having just such effects. The drug seems to dissolve the contours of human living and striving, reducing the characters in Huxley’s novel to contented, indeterminate citizen-blobs that are almost prototypical of Un-Dignity.

Another prototypical image of Un-Dignity, one from the realm of science, is that of the “wire-headed” rat which has had electrodes inserted into its brain’s reward areas.²⁷ The model a self-stimulating rat, which will relentlessly press its lever – foregoing

²⁷ (Routtenberg and Lindy 1965).

opportunities for mating, rest, even food and drink – until it either collapses from fatigue or dies, is not exactly one that commands a “reverential mode of response” or an “upward-looking type of the *pro* attitude”. If we picture a human being in place of the rat, we would have to say that it is one Un-Dignified human, or at any rate a human engaged in a very Un-Dignified activity.²⁸

Would life in such an Un-Dignified state (assuming for the sake of argument that the pleasure was indefinitely sustainable and ignoring any wider effects on society) be preferable to life as we know it? Clearly, this depends on the quality of the life that we know. Given a sufficiently bleak alternative, intracranial electrical stimulation certainly seems much preferable; for example, for patients who are slowly dying in unbearable cancer pains and for whom other methods of palliation are ineffective.²⁹ It is even possible that for such patients, wire-heading and similar interventions increase their Dignity as a Quality (not to mention other components of their well-being).³⁰ Some estimable English doctors were once in the habit of administering to cancer patients in their last throes an elixir known as the Brompton cocktail, a mixture of cocaine, heroin and alcohol:

Drawing life to a close with a transcendently orgasmic bang, and not a pathetic and god-forsaken whimper, can turn dying into the culmination of one’s existence rather than its present messy and protracted anti-climax... One is conceived in pleasure. One may reasonably hope to die in it.³¹

Bowing out in such a manner would not only be a lot more fun, it seems, but also more *dignified* than the alternative.

But suppose that the comparison case is not unbearable agony but a typical situation from an average person’s life. Then becoming like a wire-headed rat, obsessively pressing a lever to the exclusion of all other activities and concerns, would

²⁸ The Stoics generalized this point, maintaining that “sensual pleasure is quite unworthy of the dignity of man and that we ought to despise it and cast it from us” (Cicero 1913), book 1, chapter 30. The virtue and dignity of asceticism, and the converse sinfulness and debasement of flesh-pleasing, have also been recurring themes in some religious traditions.

²⁹ It is used for this purpose in humans; (Kumar, Toth et al. 1997).

³⁰ For a discussion of the relations between dignity and suffering, see (Pullman 2002).

³¹ (Pearce 2001).

surely entail a catastrophic loss of Dignity as a Quality. Whether or not such a life would nevertheless be preferable to an ordinary human life (again assuming it to be sustainable and ignoring the wider consequences) – depends on fundamental issues in value theory. According to hedonism such a life would be preferable. If the pleasure would be great enough, it might also be preferable according to some other accounts of well-being. On many other value theories, of course, such a wire-headed life would be far inferior to the typical human life. These axiological questions are outside the scope of this essay.³²

Let us refocus on Dignity as a Quality. A life like one of a wire-headed rat would be radically deprived of Dignity as a Quality compared to a typical human life. But the wire-heading scenario is not necessarily representative – even as a caricature – of what a life with some form of emotional enhancement would be like. Some hedonic enhancements would not transform us into passive, complacent, loveless, and longing-less blobs. On the contrary, they could increase our zest for life, infuse us with energy and initiative, and heighten our capacity for love, desire, and ambition. There are different forms of pleasurable states of mind – some that are passive, relaxed, and comfortable, and others that are active, excited, enthusiastic, and joyfully thrilling. The wire-headed rat is potentially a highly misleading model of what even a simply hedonically enhanced life could be like. And emotional enhancement could take many forms other than elevation of subjective well-being or pleasure.

If we imagine somebody whose zest for and enjoyment of life has been enhanced beyond the current average human level, by means of some pharmaceutical or other intervention, it is not obvious that we must think of this as being associated with any loss of Dignity as a Quality. A state of mania is not dignified, but a controlled passion for life and what it has to offer is compatible with a high degree of Dignity as a Quality. It seems to me that such a state of being could easily be decidedly more dignified than the ho-hum affective outlook of a typical day in the average person's life.

Perhaps it would be slightly preferable, from the point of view of Dignity as a Quality, if the better mood resulted from a naturally smiling temperament or if it had

³² To assume that Dignity as a Quality has any intrinsic value would already be to renounce strict hedonism. However, even if one denies that Dignity as a Quality has intrinsic value, one might still think that it has other kinds of significance – for example, it might have instrumental value, or it might have value insofar as somebody desires it, or the concept of Dignity as a Quality might express or summarize certain common concerns.

been attained by means of some kind of psychological self-overcoming. But if some help had to be sought from a safe and efficacious pill, I do not see that it would make a vast difference in terms of how much Dignity as a Quality could be invested in the resulting state of mind.

One important factor in the Dignity as a Quality of our emotions is the extent to which they are appropriate responses to aspects of the world. Many emotions have an evaluative element, and one might think that for such an emotion to have Dignity as a Quality it must be a response to a situation or a phenomenon that we recognize as deserving the evaluation contained in the emotion. For example, anger might be dignified only on occasions where there is something to be angry about and the anger is directed at that object in recognition of its offensiveness. This criterion could in principle be satisfied not only by emotions arising spontaneously from our native temperament but also by emotions encouraged by some affective enhancement. Some affective enhancements could expand our evaluative range and create background conditions that would enable us to respond to values with regard to which we might otherwise be blind or apathetic. Moreover, even if some situations objectively call for certain emotional responses, there might be some indeterminacy such that any response within a range could count as objectively appropriate. This is especially plausible when we consider baseline mood or subjective well-being. Some people are naturally downbeat and glum; others are brimming with cheer and good humor. Is it really the case that one of these sentiments is objectively appropriate to the world? If so, which one? Those who are sad may say the former; those who are happy, the latter. I doubt that there is a fact of the matter.

It appears to me that the main threat to Dignity as a Quality from emotional enhancement would come not from the use of mood-brighteners to improve positive affect in everyday life, but from two other directions. One of these is the socio-cultural dimension, which I shall discuss in the next section. The other is the potential use of emotional “enhancements” by individuals to clip the wings of their own souls. This would be the result if we used emotional enhancers in ways that would cause us to become so “well-adjusted” and psychologically adaptable that we lost hold of our ideals, our loves and hates, or our capacity to respond spontaneously with the full register of human emotion to the exigencies of life.

Critics of enhancement are wont to dwell on how it could erode dignity. They often omit to point out how enhancement could help raise our dignity. But let us pause and ask ourselves just how much Dignity as a Quality a person has who spends four or five hours every day watching television? Whose passions are limited to a subset of eating, drinking, shopping, gratifying their sexual needs, watching sport, and sleeping? Who has never had an original idea, never willingly deviated from the path of least resistance, and never devoted himself seriously to any pursuit or occupation that was not handed him on the platter of cultural expectations? Perhaps, with regard to Dignity as a Quality, there is more distance to rise than to fall.

Socio-Culturally Mediated Effects

In addition to their direct effects on the treated individuals, enhancements might have indirect effects on culture and society. Such socio-cultural changes will in turn affect individuals, influencing in particular how much Dignity as a Quality they are likely to develop and display in their lives. Education, media, cultural norms, and the general social and physical matrix of our lives can either foster or stymie our potential to develop and live with Dignity as a Quality.

Western consumerist culture does not seem particularly hospitable to Dignity as a Quality. Various spiritual traditions, honor cultures, Romanticism, or even the Medieval chivalric code of ethics seem to have been more conducive to Dignity as a Quality, although some elements of contemporary culture – in particular, individualism – could in principle be important building blocks of a dignified personality. Perhaps there is a kind of elitism or aristocratic sensibility inherent in the cultivation of Dignity as a Quality that does not sit easily with the mass culture and egalitarian pretensions of modernity. Perhaps, too, there is some tension between the current emphasis on instrumentalist thinking and scientific rationality, on the one hand, and the (dignified) reliance on stable personal standards and ideals on the other. The perfect Bayesian rationalist, who has no convictions but only a fluid network of revisable beliefs, whose probability she feels

compelled to update according to a fixed kinematics whenever new evidence impinges on her senses, has arguably surrendered some of her autonomy to an algorithm.³³

How would the widespread use and social acceptance of enhancement technologies affect the conditions for the development of individual Dignity as a Quality? The question cannot be answered a priori. Unfortunately, nor can it currently be answered a posteriori other than in the most speculative fashion. We lack both the theory and the data that would be required to make any firm predictions about such matters. Social and cultural changes are difficult to forecast, especially over long time spans during which the technological bases of human civilizations will undergo profound transformations. Any answer we give today is apt to reveal more about our own hopes, fears, and prejudices than about what is likely to happen in the future.

When Leon Kass asserts that homogenization, mediocrity, pacification, drug-induced contentment, debasement of taste, and souls without loves and longings are the inevitable results of making human nature a project of technical mastery, he is not, as far as I can glean from his writings, basing this conviction on any corroborated social science model, or indeed on any kind of theory, data set, or well-developed argument. A more agnostic stance would better match the available evidence. We can, I think, conceive of scenarios in which Kass' forebodings come true, and of other scenarios in which the opposite happens. Until somebody develops better arguments, we shall be ignorant as to which it will be. Insofar as both scenarios are within reach, we might have most reason to work to realize one in which enhancement options do become available and are used in ways which increase our Dignity as a Quality along with other more important values.

The Dignity of Civilizations

Dignity as a Quality can be attributed to entities other than persons, including populations, societies, cultures, and civilizations. Some of the adverse consequences of enhancement that Kass predicts would pertain specifically to such collectives.

“Homogeneity” is not a property of an individual; it is a characteristic of a group of

³³ I say this as a fan of the Bayesian way. Another view would be that we do not have any coherent notion of autonomy that is distinct from responding to one's reasons, in which case the perfect Bayesian rationalist might – at at least in her epistemic performance) the epitome of dignity. That view would be more congruent with many earlier writers on dignity, including Kant.

individuals. It is not so clear, however, what Dignity as a Quality consists in when predicated to a collective. Being farther from the prototype application of the idea of dignity, such attributions of Dignity as a Quality to collectives may rely on value judgments to a greater extent than is the case when we apply it to individuals, where the descriptive components of the concept carry more of the weight.

For example, many moderns regard various forms of *equality* as important for a social order to have Dignity as a Quality. We may hold that there is something undignified about a social order which is marked by rigid status hierarchies and in which people are treated very unequally because of circumstances of birth and other factors outside their control. Many of us think that there is something decisively Undignified about a society in which beggars sit on the sidewalk and watch limousines drive by, or in which the conspicuous consumption of the children of the rich contrasts too sharply with the squalor and deprivation of the children of the poor.

An observer from different era might see things differently. For instance, an English aristocrat from the 17th century, placed in a time machine and brought forward into contemporary Western society, might be shocked at what would see. While he would, perhaps, be favorably impressed by our modern comforts and conveniences, our enormous economic wealth, our medical techniques and so forth, he might also be appalled at the loss of Dignity as a Quality that has accompanied these improvements. He steps out of the time machine and beholds vulgarized society, swarming with indecency and moral decay. He looks around and shudders as he sees how the rich social architecture of his own time, in which everybody, from the King down to the lowliest servant, knew their rank and status, and in which people were tied together in an intricate tapestry of duties, obligations, privileges, and patronage – how this magnificently ordered social cathedral has been flattened and replaced by an endless suburban sprawl, a *homogenized* society where the spires of nobility have been demolished, where the bonds of loyalty have been largely dissolved, the family pared down to its barest nucleus, the roles of lord and subject collapsed in that of consumer, the Majesty of the Crown usurped by a multinational horde of Burger Kings.

Whether or not our imaginary observer would judge that on balance the changes had been for the better, he would most likely feel that they had been accompanied by a

tragic loss and that part of this loss would be a loss of Dignity as a Quality, for individuals but especially for society. Moreover, this loss of societal Dignity would reside in some of the same changes that many of us would regard as gains in societal Dignity as a Quality.

We spark up a conversation with our time-traveling visitor and attempt to convince him that his view about Dignity as a Quality is incorrect. He attempts to convince us that it is our view that is defective. The disagreement, it seems, would be about value judgments and, to some extent, about aesthetic judgments. It is uncertain whether either side would succeed in persuading the other.

We could imagine other such transtemporal journeys, perhaps bringing a person from ancient Athens into the Middle Ages, or from the Middle Ages into the Enlightenment Era, or from the time when all humans were hunter-gatherers into any one of these later periods. Or we could imagine these journeys in the reverse, sending a person back in time. While each of these time travelers would likely recognize certain *individuals* in all the societies as having Dignity as a Quality, they might well find all the *societies* they were visiting seriously lacking in Dignity as a Quality. Even if we restrict ourselves to the present time, most of us probably find it easier to identify Un-Dignity in societies that are very different from our own, even though we have been taught that we ought not to be so prejudiced against of foreign cultures.

The point I wish to make with these observations is that if you or I were shown a crystal ball revealing human society as it will be a few centuries from today, it is likely that the society we would see would appear to us as being in important respects Undignified compared to our own. This would seem to be the default expectation even apart from any technological enhancements which might by then have entered into common use. And therein lies one of those fine ironies of history. One generation conceives a beautiful design and lays the ground stones of a better tomorrow. Then they die, and the next generation decides to erect a different structure on the foundation that was built, a structure that is more beautiful in their eyes but which would have been hideous to their predecessors. The original architects are no longer there to complain, but if the dead could see they would turn in their graves. *O tempora, o mores*, cry the old, and the bones of our ancestors rattle their emphatic consent!

It is possible to take a more optimistic view of the possibilities of secular change in the societal and cultural realms. One might believe that the history of humankind shows signs of moral progress, a slow and fluctuating trend towards more justice and less cruelty. Even if one does not detect such a trend in history, one might still hope that the future will bring more unambiguous amelioration of the human condition. But there are many variables other than Dignity as a Quality that influence our evaluation of possible cultures and societies (such as the extent to which Human Dignity is respected to name but one). It may be that we have to content ourselves with hoping for improvements in these other variables, recognizing that Dignity as a Quality, when ascribed to forms of social organization rather than individuals, is too indeterminate a concept – and possibly too culture-relative – for even an optimist to feel confident that future society or future culture will appear highly dignified by current lights.

I will therefore not discuss by what means one might attempt to increase the Dignity as a Quality of present or future society, except to note that enhancement could possibly play a role. For example, if homogenization is antithetical to a society having Dignity as a Quality, then enhancements that strengthen individuals' ability to resist group pressure and that encourage creativity and originality, maybe even a degree of eccentricity, could help not only individuals to attain more Dignity as a Quality but also society, thanks to the cultural diversification that such individuals would create.

A Relational Component?

Let us return to the Dignity as a Quality of individuals. One might attribute Dignity as Quality to an individual not only because of her intrinsic characteristics but – arguably – also because of her relational properties. For example, one might think that the oldest tree has a Dignity as a Quality that it would not possess if there were another tree that was older, or that the last Mohican had a special Dignity as a Quality denied to the penultimate Mohican.

We humans like to pride ourselves on being the smartest and most advanced species on the planet. Perhaps this position gives us a kind of Dignity as a Quality, one which could be shared by all humans, including mediocrities and even those who fall below some non-human animals in terms of cognitive ability? We would have this

special Dignity as a Quality through our belonging to a species whose membership has included such luminaries as Michelangelo and Einstein. We might then worry that we would risk losing this special dignity if, through the application of radical enhancement technologies, we created another species (or intelligent machines) that surpassed human genius in all dimensions? Becoming a member of the second-most advanced species on the planet (supposing one were not among the radically enhanced) sounds like a demotion.

We need to be careful here not to conflate Dignity as a Quality with other concepts, such as social rank or status. With the birth of cognitively superior posthumans, the rank of humans would suffer (at least if rank were determined by cognitive capacity). It does not follow that our Dignity as a Quality would have been reduced; that is a separate question. Perhaps we should hold, rather, that our Dignity as a Quality would have been increased, on grounds of our membership in another collective – the Club of Tellurian Life. This club, while less exclusive than the old Club of Humanity, would boast some extremely illustrious members after the human species had been eclipsed by its posthuman descendants.

There might nevertheless be a loss of Dignity as a Quality for individual human beings. Those individuals who were previously at the top of their fields would no longer occupy such a distinguished position. If there is a special Dignity as a Quality (as opposed to merely social status) in having a distinguished position, then this dignity would be transferred to the new occupants of the pinnacles of excellence.

We cannot here explore all the possible ways in which relational properties could be affected by human enhancement, so I will draw attention to just one other relational property, that of uniqueness. Reproductive cloning is not a prototypal enhancement, but we can use it to raise a question.³⁴ Does a person's uniqueness contribute something to her Dignity as a Quality? If so, one might object to human cloning on grounds that it would result in a progeny who – other things equal – would have less Dignity as a Quality than a sexually conceived child. Of course, we should not commit the error of genetic essentialism or genetic determinism; but neither should we make the opposite

³⁴ One could argue that reproductive cloning would be an enhancement of our reproductive capacities, giving us the ability to reproduce in a way that was previously impossible.

error of thinking that genes don't matter. People who have the same genes tend to be more similar to one another than people who are not genetically identical. In this context, "uniqueness" is a matter of degree, so a set of clones of an average person would tend to be "less unique" than most people.³⁵

Naturally occurring identical twins would be as genetically similar as a pair of clones. (Natural identical twins also tend to share the same womb and rearing environment, which clones would not necessarily do.) Since we do not think that natural twins are victims of a significant misfortune, we can conclude that *either* the loss of one's degree of uniqueness resulting from the existence of another individual who is genetically identical to oneself does not entail a significant loss of Dignity as a Quality, *or* losing some of one's Dignity as a Quality is not a significant misfortune (or both).

One might still worry about more extreme cases. Consider the possibility of not just a few clones being created of an individual, but many millions. Or more radically, consider the possibility of the creation of millions of copies of an individual who would all be much more similar to one another than monozygotic twins are.³⁶ In these imaginary cases, it seems more plausible that a significant loss of Dignity as a Quality would occur among the copied individuals. Perhaps this would be a *pro tanto* reason against the realization of such scenarios.

Dignity Outside the Human World: Quiet Values

Dignity as a Quality is not necessarily confined to human beings and collectives of human beings.

The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe. It's not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are

³⁵ Unless, perhaps, cloning were so rare that being a clone would itself mark one out as a highly unusual and "unique" kind of person.

³⁶ Human "uploading" is one possible future technology that might lead to such a scenario; (Moravec 1988). Another would be the creation of many copies of the same sentient artificial intelligence.

ambassadors from another time. They have the mystery of ferns that disappeared a million years ago into the coal of the carboniferous era. ... The vainest, most slap-happy and irreverent of men, in the presence of redwoods, goes under a spell of wonder and respect. ... One feels the need to bow to unquestioned sovereigns.³⁷

It is easy to emphasize with the response that John Steinbeck describes, and it fits quite well with Kolnai's account of the characteristic response to dignity.

Another example:

[One] of my colleagues [recounts a story] about once taking his young son to a circus in town, and discovering a lone protestor outside the tent silently holding aloft a sign that read "REMEMBER THE DIGNITY OF THE ELEPHANTS." It hit him like a lightning bolt, he said. The protester's point is surely an intelligible one, though we could debate whether it is genuinely reason enough to avoid all types of circuses.³⁸

We need a name for the property that we feel we are responding to in examples like the above, and "Dignity as Quality" fits the bill. We might also apply this concept to certain actions, activities, and achievements, perhaps to certain human relationships, and to many other things, which I shall not explore here.

The Dignity as a Quality that we attribute to non-humans (or more accurately, to non-persons) is of a different type from that which we attribute to human beings. One way to characterize the difference is by using a distinction introduced by Stephen Darwall.³⁹ Darwall describes two different kinds of attitude both of which are referred to by the term "respect". The first kind he calls *recognition respect*. This attitude consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of its object in deliberating about what to do, and it can have any number of different sorts of things as

³⁷ (Steinbeck 1962), p. 168f.

³⁸ (Duncan 2006), p. 5.

³⁹ (Darwall 1977). What follows is a simplified description of Darwall's account which skirts over some of its finer points.

its object. The other kind, which he calls *appraisal respect*, consists in an attitude of positive appraisal of a person either as a person or as engaged in some particular pursuit. The appropriate ground for appraisal respect is that a person has manifested positive characteristics or excellences which we attribute to his character, especially those which belong to him as a moral agent.

For example, when we say that Human Dignity must be respected, we presumably mean that it must be given recognition respect. We owe this respect to all people equally, independently of their moral character or any special excellences that they might have or lack. By contrast, when we say that we should respect Gandhi for his magnanimity, we are probably referring to appraisal respect (although his magnanimity should also in certain contexts be given recognition respect). Similarly, if someone has a high degree of Dignity as a Quality (perhaps Gandhi again), this also calls for appraisal respect.

The kind of Dignity as a Quality that we attribute to non-agents does not call for appraisal respect, since only agents have moral character. Thus we can distinguish between Dignity as a Quality in the narrow sense, as a property possessed only by (some) agents, and which calls for appraisal respect; and Dignity as a Quality in a wider sense, which could be possessed by any number of types of object, and which calls for recognition respect only. We do not have to literally *admire* or *give credit to* the redwoods for having grown so tall and having lived so long; but we can still recognize them as possessing certain features that we should take into account in deliberating about what we do to them. In particular, if we are truly impressed by their Dignity as a Quality (in the wide sense), then we ought to show our recognition respect for their dignity – perhaps by not harvesting them down for their timber, or by refraining from urinating on them.

Dignity as a Quality, in this wide sense, is ubiquitous. What is limited, I would suggest, is not the supply but our ability to appreciate it. Even inanimate objects can possess it. For a mundane example, consider the long, slow, sad decline of a snowman melting in the backyard. Would not an ideally sensitive observer recognize a certain Dignity as a Quality in the good Snowman, Esq.?

The ethical fades here into the aesthetical (and perhaps into the sentimental), and it is not clear that there exists any sharp line of demarcation. But however we draw our

conceptual boundaries, our normative discourse would be impoverished if it could not lend expression to and genuinely take into account what is at stake in cases like these. Perhaps we could coin the category of *quiet values* to encompass not only Dignity as a Quality in this extended sense, but also other small, subtle, or non-domineering values. We may contrast these quiet values with a category of *loud values*, which would be more starkly prudential or moral, and which tend to dominate the quiet values in any direct comparison. The category of loud values might include things like alleviation of suffering, justice, equality, freedom, fairness, respect for Human Dignity, health and survival, and so forth.⁴⁰

It is not necessarily a fault of applied ethics, insofar as it aims to influence regulation and public policy, that it tends to focus exclusively on loud values. If on one side of the scales we put celebrating the Dignity as a Quality of Mr. Snowman, and on the other we put providing a poverty-stricken child with a vaccination, the latter will always weigh more heavily.

Nevertheless, there may be a broader significance to the quiet values. While individually weak, in aggregate they are formidable. They are the dark matter of value theory (or, for all ye business consultants among my readers, *the long tail of axiology*). Fail to uphold a quiet value on one occasion, and nothing noticeable is lost. But extirpate or disregard all the quiet values all the time, and the world turns into a sterile, desolate, impoverished place. The quiet values add the luminescence, the rich texture of meaning, the wonder and awe, and much of the beauty and nobility of human action. In major part, this contribution is aesthetic, and the realization of this kind of value might depend crucially on our subjective conscious responses. Yet, at least in the idea of Dignity as a Quality, which is our focal concern here, the moral and the aesthetic blend into one another, and the possibility of responding to the realm of quiet values (or helping it into existence through acts of creative imagination and feeling) can have moral implications.

⁴⁰ It is, of course, a substantive normative question in which of these categories to place a value. For example, Nietzsche might have held Dignity as a Quality to be a loud value, and he might have thought that equality was no value at all. One big question, even if one does not share Nietzsche's view, is how we ought to treat Dignity as a Quality from an impartial standpoint. Is it better to have a few supremely dignified persons surrounded by many with little dignity, or better to have a modicum of dignity widely spread?

The Eschatology of Dignity

Kolnai describes a certain mode of utopian thinking as inimical to Dignity as a Quality:

[Some people believe] that by the ensuring through a collective agency of everybody's "Human Dignity" (including a sense of individual self-assertion and self-fulfillment) everyone will also acquire Dignity as a Quality or, what comes to the same thing, the concept of "Dignity as a Quality" will lose its point – a view prefigured by the first great apostle of Progress, Condorcet, who confidently foresaw a rationally and scientifically redrawn world in which there would be no opportunity for the exercise of heroic virtue nor any sense in revering it. ... The core of Un-Dignity, as I would try to put it succinctly, is constituted by an attitude of refusal to recognize, experience, and bear with, the tension between Value and Reality; between what things ought to be, should be, had better be or are desired to be and what things are, can be and are allowed to be.⁴¹

This raises the question of whether there would be any role left to play for Dignity as a Quality if the world, thanks to various political, medical, economical, and technological advances, reached a level of perfection far beyond its present troubled state. The question becomes perhaps especially acute if we suppose that the transhumanist aspiration to overcome some of our basic biological limitations were to be realized. Might the tension between Value and Reality then be relaxed in such a way that Dignity as a Quality would become meaningless or otiose?

Let us make a leap into an imaginary future posthuman world, in which technology has reached its logical limits. The superintelligent inhabitants of this world are *autopotent*, meaning that they have complete power over and operational understanding of themselves, so that they are able to remold themselves at will and assume any internal state they choose. An autopotent being could, for example, easily transform itself into the shape of a woman, a man, or a tree. Such a being could also easily enter any subjective state it wants to be in, such as state of pleasure or indignation,

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 262. Kolnai stresses that the "core of Un-Dignity" does *not* include "either submission to the existing order of things and the virtue of patience, or a sustained endeavor for reform, improvement and assuagement."

or a state of experiencing the visual and tactile sensations of a dolphin swimming in the sea. We can also assume that these posthumans have thorough control over their environment, so that they can make molecularly exact copies of objects and implement any physical design for which they have conceived of a detailed blueprint. They could make a forest of redwood trees disappear, and then recreate an exactly similar forest somewhere else; and they could populate it with dinosaurs or dragons – they would have the same kind of control of physical reality as programmers and designers today have over virtual reality, but with the ability to imagine and create much more detailed (e.g. biologically realistic) structures. We might say that the autopotent superintelligences are living in a “plastic world” because they can easily remold their environment exactly as they see fit.

Now, it might be that in any technological utopia which we have any real chance of creating, all individuals will remain constrained in important ways. In addition to the challenges of the physical frontiers, which might at this stage be receding into deep space as the posthuman civilization expands beyond its native planet, there are the challenges created by the existence of other posthumans, that is, the challenges of the social realm. Resources even in Plastic World would soon become scarce if population growth is exponential, but aside from material constraints, individual agents would face the constraints imposed on them by the choices and actions of other agents. Insofar as our goals are irreducibly social – for example to be loved, respected, given special attention or admiration, or to be allowed to spend time or to form exclusive bonds with the people we choose, or to have a say in what other people do – we would still be limited in our ability to achieve our goals. Thus, a being in Plastic World may be very far from omnipotent. Nevertheless, we may suppose that a large portion of the constraints we currently face have been lifted and that both our internal states and the world around us have become much more malleable to our wishes and desires.

In Plastic World, many of the moral imperatives with which we are currently struggling are easily satisfiable. As the loud values fall silent, the quiet values become

more audible.⁴² With most externally imposed constraints eliminated by technological progress, the constraints *which we choose to impose on ourselves* become paramount.

In this setting, Dignity as a Quality could be an organizing idea. While inanimate objects cannot possess Human Dignity, they can be endowed with a kind of Dignity as a Quality. The autopotent inhabitants of Plastic World could choose to cultivate their sensibility for Dignity as a Quality and the other quiet values. By choosing to recognize these values and to treat the world accordingly, they would be accepting some constraints on their actions. It is by accepting such constraints that they could build, or rather *cultivate* their Plastic World into something that has greater value than a daydream. It is also by accepting such constraints – perhaps only by doing so – that it would be possible for them to preserve their own Dignity as a Quality. This dignity would not consist in resisting or defying the world. Rather, theirs would be a dignity of the strong, consisting in self-restraint and the positive nurturance of both internal and external values.

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⁴² This is not to say that the quiet values would actually be heard or heeded if and when the loud values fall silent. Whether that would happen is difficult to predict. But an *ideal* moral agent would begin to pay more attention to the quiet values in such circumstances and would let them play a greater role in guiding her conduct.

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